Re-reading the Gospel of Luke today : from a first century urban writing site to a twentieth century urban reading site

Thesis

Re-reading the Gospel of Luke Today: From a First Century Urban Writing Site to a Twentieth Century Urban Reading Site

Volume One

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics.
GNB	Good News Bible.
JB	Jerusalem Bible.
KJV	King James Version.
NIV	New International Version.
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version.
RSV	Revised Standard Version.
SMH	Sydney Morning Herald.

To Rowena, Asher & Toby,

and those who struggle
for justice, equity and peace,

and with those who,
like my friend Andrew Wardle:

'understand God less and less,
find the Bible even stranger,
and still want to follow Jesus'.

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Abstract

Postmodern theorising has presented the reader as an active agent in the process of the interpretation of texts. Sociology of knowledge approaches have identified both the author *and* the reader of texts as socially embodied within a context. This study presents a unique collection of readings in the Gospel of Luke by ordinary real-readers from a disadvantaged and/or marginalised social and ecclesial location, within an affluent first world context. These readings, transcribed in Volume Two, present empirical reader research for analysis, through dialogue and conversation with professional readings in the Gospel of Luke, in order to assess what contribution the former might make to contemporary hermeneutics. Identifying contemporary human experience of ordinary real-readers as the starting point in their reading of the Lukan text, the study illustrates how these readings act as a useful tool of suspicion in conversation with readings that claim to be objective and value-neutral, and how they facilitate critical reflection on the ideological and theological commitments of the dominant classes in society and church. The value and legitimacy of the readings of ordinary real-readers is discussed, and how their social and ecclesial marginalisation and disadvantage provides a nontotalising presence in biblical interpretation, a presence that guards against the claims of permanence made by those in the academic and ecclesial world. Identification of contemporary human experience as inevitably influencing the process of interpretation leads to a consideration of the place of the historical-critical paradigm in biblical studies. The value and legitimacy of ordinary real-readers as active agents in the process of interpretation, and the contribution they make to contemporary hermeneutics, requires a consideration of safeguards against reading anarchy. The process of self and social analysis, and an openness to dialogue and conversation with those outside our own contexts, including our ancestors in the faith, is considered as a way forward, utilising ordinary and professional real-readers in the ongoing process of biblical interpretation.

Chapter One

Orientation

An Encounter With Ordinary Real-readers.

Some eight years ago I listened to two sex-workers (or 'prostitutes' as they are pejoratively known),[1] read for the first time Matthew 21: 31-32:

> Jesus said to them. 'I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way to righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him'.

This reading took place in a small back street cafe. This cafe was jointly run by the local Anglican parish and other inner city churches in a back street located in Kings Cross, the inner city Sydney suburb in Australia, best known for its sex-entertainment industry, night clubs and as the symbolic centre for the trade in illegal drugs. As a point of outreach to women, men and trans-sexuals working in the sex industry, this cafe had become widely accepted as a safe place for them. Like others I was a member of a group of volunteers that staffed the cafe each Monday night.

The reading took place in the midst of an animated conversation between one volunteer and a group of trans-sexual sex-workers (a particularly marginalised group), where the latter were emphatic about the fact as they saw it, that there was no place for them in any type of Christian community, and that God would have already condemned them for ever.

The reading of Matthew 21: 31-32 provoked a stunned silence, followed by the loud exclamation 'there's prostitutes in the Bible!'. For at least thirty minutes the

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1 In Sydney, the word prostitute has a derogatory meaning. People working in the sex industry have collectively agreed to describe their occupation as that of 'sex-worker'.

text was discussed and re-read. It was clear that whatever the 'kingdom of God' was, prostitutes were included. Discussion of who the 'you' were in the 'ahead of you' part of the text in verse 31 lead the readers to read more widely and to discover that in the full context of the story, the 'you' referred to people described in verse 23 as 'the chief priests and the elders of the people'. While nobody was sure who the 'elders of the people' were, they readily identified the 'chief priests' as religious figures. Further discussion led to the recognition that what they had read suggested that Jesus was including in the kingdom of God (some suggested that might be heaven), people with the same occupation as the readers themselves. Jesus was including 'prostitutes' in the kingdom of God, but in the story of their lives they only knew they were excluded by the church and society in general. There was an element of shock in this recognition, and an agreement that more reading would be done when the need to go back to work was not so pressing.

During at least twenty years as an adult, I had not been exposed to any major consideration of this text, either through formal theological studies or through homilies or sermons considering what the text had to say to our contemporary situation. What I had observed however was the reading and reception of a text that lead to an interpretation that would be highly resisted by contemporary 'chief priests' and found to be offensive by the middle class worshipping community, who constitute the majority of church attenders in the context of Sydney, and who relegate 'prostitutes' to a marginal and despised social location.

Upon further reflection it occurred to me that the readers were engaged in the reading process, with a number of pre-suppositions, that related to their social location. They firstly assumed that they would not be mentioned in a 'sacred text' like the Bible. If they were, it was assumed it would be in the form of condemnation or judgement. When they read the text they read it in the form in which they had it. Simple English. They read the text synchronically, without

reference to its history or background. What they did not understand was disregarded in favour of what they did understand, and the latter was enough to make sense of the text for them. Their interpretation of the text was from the perspective of life experience - the reality of their social embodiment - their day to day experiences of rejection and marginalisation as people who worked on the streets selling their bodies. Without recourse to the tools of the historical-critical paradigm or other sophisticated academic resources, they read the text in their context, and produced an interpretation of the contemporary meaning of the text that is hard to dispute, but which has been much easier to ignore. To summarise their conclusions: Jesus welcomes sex-workers - the contemporary church does not.

In summary, I realised in hind-sight, my observation was of non-trained 'ordinary'[2] readers of the text engaged in the process of biblical interpretation. Their reading of the text exposed at least the contemporary commitment of main stream churches in Sydney to ignore this text in favour of others that more readily confirmed their own social location and pre-suppositions. It was this experience that ignited my interest in the way in which people from different social locations within the same city read and interpret the biblical text. It raised the question: to what extent could those from marginalised social locations bring new readings and interpretations into the overall hermeneutic conversation?

This interest meshed with my previous work with social-scientific approaches in New Testament study. I had become aware of the social, political, cultural and ideological embededness of the author of the Gospel of Luke through the work of

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2 I use the term 'ordinary' to refer to generally non-trained, non-professional readers of the Bible. These readers are the majority of readers of the biblical text, and come from outside the 'guild' of the trained professional interpreters of the text, located in church and academy. I also use the term real-reader to indicate the ordinary readers engaged in this study are 'flesh-and-blood' real readers, a distinction discussed further in chapter two and five. The use of the term ordinary real-reader in this paper will also include those readers who are marginalised and/or disadvantaged either within a social or ecclesiological sense. The specific social and ecclesiological location of the ordinary real-readers involved in this study, and their individual profiles are discussed in chapter two.

Philip Esler[3], and others in what is known as the 'Context Group'. This interest in the social embodiment of the author of the Gospel of Luke heightened my interest in the social embodiment of contemporary readers of the Gospel of Luke.

Consequently this study emerged: an analysis of 'readings' in the Gospel of Luke with ordinary real-readers, (some partially trained), who inhabit a marginalised eccelsial and/or disadvantaged social location in the inner city of Sydney. This analysis is conducted in dialogue or conversation with professional readings of the Gospel of Luke, in order to determine what contribution ordinary real-readers from this particular location might make to current reading strategies and contemporary hermeneutics.

Nature of the present Study:

The argument of this thesis is that the reading and interpretation[4] of biblical texts by ordinary real-readers, from a disadvantaged and marginalised social and ecclesial location, can make a valuable contribution to contemporary hermeneutics. These readings can serve as a tool of 'suspicion', and provide those in other reading locations with a useful conversation and dialogue partner. If allowed by other reading communities, or hermeneutic locations, they also provide the possibility whereby professional reading communities may be more self-critical and openly identify their own theological and ideological commitments. The process of dialogue and conversation will also enrich the ordinary real-readers'

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3 In particular, Philip Esler, Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology, (Cambridge: CUP, 1987).

4 To equate 'reading' and 'interpretation' as I do here, is unacceptable in some contexts. See Anthony Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading, (London: Harper Collins, 1992), p.2, who notes: 'Some writers replace traditional terminology about biblical "interpretation" by the term "reading" simply for cosmetic purposes. But other writers use "reading" to signal a paradigm-shift in which a new agenda focuses on semiotic and literary issues.' He comments further: 'I argue that this brings significant gains but also possible losses. Each of the terms "understanding", "interpretation", and "reading" needs to be broadened to include hermeneutical issues about understanding, knowledge, communication, and truth, as well as questions about the competency of the reader at the semiotic level.'

interpretations, provided the conversation is open and power foregrounded[5] as part of the process.

The reading and interpretation of biblical texts has been located historically and traditionally within the church and the academies.[6] Trained professional readers of texts have determined acceptable reading strategies, dependent upon their expertise.

The rise of a sense of suspicion in hermeneutics, the work of those in liberation, black and feminist theology, and recent developments in literary theory, have revealed these reading strategies as ideologically laden and often serving the interests of those in power, or reflecting the values of the dominant classes in society.

The movement in hermeneutics from post-Enlightenment historical-critical approaches through the rise of literary theory to structuralism and on to reader-response theories, has seen a shift from an interest in the origins of a text and in the text itself, towards an interest in the relationship between text and reader, where the reader is no longer seen as a passive receptor, but an active creative contributor in the interpretative process. Sociology of knowledge approaches have identified the reader as 'socially' located, while postmodern theorising has called into question all metanarratives.[7]

The social location of traditionally formulated hermeneutic strategies has been revealed to be that of the professional readers and within the dominant class of

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5 I use the word 'foregrounded' following its use by Gerald West and others working in contextual theology.

6 See further discussion in this thesis of the distinctions made between 'hermeneutic spaces' by Pablo Richard, 'Biblical Interpretation From The Perspective of Indigenous Cultures of Latin America' in Mark G. Brett (Ed.), Ethnicity and the Bible (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 297-314, especially in chapter five.

7 See for example, Thiselton, New Horizons; Stephen Moore, Literary Criticism and the Gospels (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Edgar V. McKnight, Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988); also Raman Selden & Peter Widdowson, A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1993).

both church and society. It has further revealed that the conversation of interpretation is mostly between, and has been between, academics or professional readers alone.

Through a process of analysis of 'empirical reader research' with ordinary real-readers from disadvantaged social and marginalised ecclesial locations, and then in conversation (or a process of dialogue) with professional biblical scholars, it will be argued:

1. That contemporary hermeneutics can look to non-elite cultures or communities of ordinary real-readers, as legitimate and valuable conversation or dialogue partners in the process of interpretation, in order to guard against claims of interpretive permanence by professional readers. Awareness of this interpretive temptation should encourage professional readers to identify the value of readings from other contexts and social locations, and with a sense of openness and humility, the usefulness they have in providing other ways in which to read and interpret biblical texts. The value of ordinary readings in this process will be recognised and legitimated.

2. Ordinary readings from real-readers *outside* the dominant social and ecclesial classes[8] are more useful for this process than those from within, because middle class readers will more likely reflect a dominant theology and ideology, a theology and ideology that confirms their 'class' experience. The readings from those in disadvantaged social and marginalised ecclesial locations will more likely reveal the theological and ideological commitments of the dominant classes precisely because such reading will be shaped and informed by an alternative set of commitments and life experience. Concurrently, it will be argued that readings from outside the professional reading communities can add new perspectives to contemporary interpretation of biblical passages. The value of

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8 Chapter three of this thesis will establish that in the Australian context the dominant class in church and society is identifiably 'the middle class'.

the 'first world' poor and marginalised in this process will 'be recognised as legitimate.

3. Social and ecclesial location has a direct effect upon the way in which people read the text. Essential to this argument will be the identification of the socially embodied location or context of the real-reader, a holistic embodiment including all aspects of 'lived experience', and the effect that social embodiment has on the way in which contemporary real-readers read and interpret biblical texts.

4. Synchronic readings of the text by ordinary real-readers, foregrounding contemporary human experience as the point of departure for the reading process, with as little intervention as possible of historical material or questions of authorial intention into the reading process, are plausible and possible, and as such, question the traditional priority of the historical-critical approach in the process of the interpretation of biblical texts in the contemporary world. Contemporary readings do not dissolve the text into contemporary human experience, a valid concern with such an approach, if a commitment is made to read the text with those from contexts different to that of the ordinary real-readers, including those from the professional reading communities.

5. Neither the ordinary nor professional reading communities are value-neutral. This requires a hermeneutic of suspicion throughout the entire conversation between the reading communities, as both communities will reflect their own socially embodied theological and ideological commitments.

The argument will proceed firstly by identifying and reviewing current work to date with ordinary reading communities, and the extent to which the approach of this thesis has antecedents upon which to build, and contribute to in new ways.

Chapter two will identify the process utilised in collecting the transcripts of ordinary real-readers reading the Gospel of Luke which comprise Volume Two of the thesis. Reader-response and related reader theories will be discussed, establishing a theoretical basis for identifying readers as active in the process of interpretation.

It is crucial to recognise that readers are all socially embodied within a broader context and particular location, chapter three will analyse and describe the context and location of the author and the ordinary reading communities engaged in this process. Historical, ideological, sociological and theological factors will be identified and analysed, including the dominant hermeneutic approach of the 'church world' in Sydney.

Taking into account the way in which context and location shapes and informs the ordinary real-readers, including dominant ideology and theology, chapter four will combine selected readings collected in Volume Two, in a process of dialogue and conversation with professional readings in the Gospel of Luke. This analysis will include: critical assessment of the facilitator's interventions; the way in which the ordinary-real-readers are shaped and informed by their particular context and location; and what contribution these readings have to make to reading the Gospel of Luke when engaged in dialogue with professional biblical scholars.

Chapter five will discuss the implications for contemporary hermeneutics that arise from this study, and possible ways forward for the development of dialogue and conversation between the ordinary and professional reading communities.

The thesis seeks to test the propositions above, through a process of dialogue and conversation between the transcribed 'readings' of ordinary real-readers, located in disadvantaged social and/or marginalised ecclesial locations, within the context of a first world affluent city, and professional readings of those located in the academies and church. This discussion of the Lukan text will provide a

distinctive and unique contribution to the process of dialogué and conversation between readings of professional and ordinary reading communities.

This study is a unique and distinctive contribution to 'empirical reader research' of biblical material from contemporary ordinary real-readers. To date no similar research has taken place within Australia. Such research however is not without its limitations and possibilities.

Justification of the present Study:

1. A positive outcome of the emergence of reader orientated criticism, postmodern theorising and the questioning of all metanarratives, is the possibility for readers outside the academies and without ecclesial power or recognition, to have a voice.

As far as I have been able to determine, those working with contemporary non-trained readers outside the academies, transcribing and analysing their readings for the purpose of discovering what they may contribute to contemporary Biblical interpretation, remain scarce. I am aware of three significant studies that have sought to collect and record for the overall hermeneutic program, such readings: firstly that of Ernesto Cardenal in Solentiname, Nicaragua[9], secondly that of Gerald West in South Africa[10] and finally that of David Sinclair in Edinburgh, Scotland.[11] Work with ordinary readers in Africa has recently been analysed and examples provided in Semeia 73.[12] Smaller projects have been conducted in other parts of the world. But while other various attempts have been made to encourage local readings and local theologies, context specific readings, or 'people's Bible

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9 Ernesto Cardenal, The Gospel in Solentiname 4 Volumes, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).

10 Gerald West, Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995ed.).

11 David Sinclair 'The Influence of Power and Class on the Biblical Interpretation of Church Members', unpublished thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh in 1993.

12 West, (Ed.), 'Reading With' Semeia 73 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

studies',[13] with the exception of the three works noted above, and five brief transcripts in The International Review of Mission in 1977, the actual collection and recording of 'ordinary' readings of biblical texts, has been of little interest to the academies, and relegated to the margins of biblical studies and hermeneutics. As West observes, the focus of reader research has almost exclusively concerned itself with theory. He notes: 'Empirical reader research of biblical material is still virtually non-existent, although many opportunities present themselves.'[14]

This study is one contribution to empirical reader research, through *the collection and recording of readings in the Gospel of Luke by ordinary real-readers, for the purpose of analysis and comparison through dialogue and conversation, with professional readings in the Gospel of Luke, in order to assess what contribution the former might make to contemporary hermeneutics.*

2. Many biblical scholars have argued, that 'the poor and the weak are the privileged ones for the birthing or re-birthing of Church . . . By standing with them the theologian will be transformed subjectively by this involvement.'[15] Despite this call for the privileging of the poor and marginalised, few Western biblical scholars have recorded, or shown any interest in recording, the *words* of poor and

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13 As John Vincent notes 'People's Bible Study' takes place in many small communities and groups in Britain, but is not yet recorded. Some of the best examples to date come from women's theology. See Ruth Musgrave, Believing Women: Eight Experience-based Bible Studies Women In Theology, 1986', in Chris Rowland & John Vincent (Eds.) Liberation Theology UK (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 1995), p. 37, ftnt. 19. Work is also being done with people from non-book cultures by Jim Hart and Neville Black and Jenny Richardson at the Evangelical Urban Training Project in Sheffield, including for example an excellent Bible study developed for readers within their context based on the film the Full Monty. The development of Base Christian Communities is also well documented, especially the implications for 'grass-roots' bible readings amongst people in the developing world, but apart from Ernesto Cardenal few seem to have been recorded. See Sergio Torres & John Eagleson (Eds.) The Challenge of Base Christian Communities (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981); Carlos Mesters Defenceless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989). R. S. Sugirtharajah (Ed.), Voices from the Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World (London: SPCK, 1991), in Part Five includes five brief examples of recorded 'local' readings of biblical texts from Africa, Asia and one small excerpt from Ernesto Cardenal's work in Solentiname. It should also be noted that in October 1977 The International Review of Mission published the 'readings' or 'comments' of several grassroots communities from the developing world.

14 West, Biblical Hermeneutics, p.175.

15 Frank Fletcher in Peter Malone (Ed.) Discovering an Australian Theology (Homebush: St Pauls, 1988), pp. 59-60.

marginalised readers within the Christian faith, in order to analyse what contribution these words might have to make to biblical scholarship. Interpretation of the experience of the poor and marginalised has taken place, but few biblical scholars have recorded their own exegetical discourse as a contribution to the contemporary interpretation of biblical texts. As Renita Weems points out, commenting on work in South Africa with real-readers from situations of poverty and oppression, this work in empirical reader research is not scholarship interested in reading on behalf of previously unheard of communities of readers; rather it is a new way of reading that involves the scholar in reading *with* previously unheard of communities of readers.[16]

With the exception of the work of David Sinclair with two groups of council housing tenants in Edinburgh, (whose work we will discuss in detail below), there has, to my knowledge, been no intentional recording of the readings of poor and marginalised people within an affluent first world context. This thesis presents *a unique collection of readings in the Gospel of Luke by those from a disadvantaged and/or marginalised, social and ecclesial location within an affluent first world context.*

3. Academic and ecclesial theology has tended to emerge from the dominant groups in society, and have often been used to legitimate the existing political and ecclesial order. Pablo Richard[17] identifies two traditional 'hermeneutical spaces': the academic space (constituted by the faculties of theology, the seminaries, or the specialised theological institutes) and the ecclesial space (liturgical and instructional). In the first 'space' the subject is the exegete or biblical specialist, in the second the ordained minister or duly constituted hierarchical subject. He argues however, on the basis of his work with indigenous cultures in Latin America, that a 'liberating' hermeneutic for biblical interpretation must create, or allow for, a 'new hermeneutical space'. This space he asserts is created when a

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16 Renita Weems, 'Response to "Reading With: An Exploration of the Interface Between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible", Semeia 73, p. 259.

17 Pablo Richard, pp. 297-314.

small community of 'indigenous' or 'ordinary' readers 'read thé bible'. In this new hermeneutical space the subject is the 'indigenous' or ordinary reader. *The readings of ordinary readers collected and transcribed as part of this thesis contribute directly to this 'new hermeneutical space'.*

This study will assess the value and legitimacy of ordinary real-readers in the process of contemporary biblical studies. Recognising a legitimate hermeneutic space for ordinary real-readers, their readings will be analysed to assess to what extent they provide a useful tool for identifying the interests and commitments of professional readers. This will foreground the factors that shape and inform the ordinary real-readers and their readings as value-laden within a specific context. The *difference* of this context or hermeneutic space, will be analysed as a possible tool for critical reflection on professional readings arising from an alternative context and hermeneutic space.

This analysis will take place itself within a particular theological and social context, a context dominated by middle class conservative evangelicalism, most clearly expressed in Sydney Anglicanism, and my own Baptist denomination. Those in Sydney who do not fit with this dominant conservative evangelical order, still find their theological directions heavily determined and dependent upon European-American theological traditions.[18]

The daily struggle of the disadvantaged and marginalised in an affluent first world city, and their attempt to speak of God in their language and context, is an *unique perspective within an affluent context, that facilitates critical reflection and discussion, of the ideological and theological commitments of the dominant classes in society and church.*

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18 See Andrew Murray, (Ed.), Can Theology be Done In Sydney? (Sydney: Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1995); Stuart Piggin, Evangelical Christianity in Australia: Spirit, word and world (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), especially pp. 203-205.

4. A result of the current ferment in reading approaches and biblical hermeneutics is a reconsideration of the priority of the historical-critical paradigm.[19] In this paradigm the meaning of the text is primarily located in the history of early Christian thought in the context of first century Hellenistic Judaism. The fundamental task of the biblical interpreter is the reconstruction of the extra-textual reality of the text, in order to locate the meaning of the text.[20] The 'theological' task of reflection on the meaning of the text for history and contemporary life is procedurally given second place. When reading approaches are preoccupied with what lies behind the text, ordinary readers remain dependent upon the skills of the sophisticated interpreter.[21]

The 'ordinary' readings collected and analysed as part of this thesis will demonstrate that ordinary readers can read and interpret the text meaningfully, without constant access to, or dependence upon, the tools of the historical-critical paradigm. [22]

Readings that focus on the contemporary meaning of a text, without primary reference to authorial intention or the historical context of the text, call into question the procedural priority of the historical-critical paradigm. Synchronic reading strategies that foreground contemporary human experience as a starting point in the reading process allow for contextual factors that shape and inform readers to surface, rather than burying these factors, or relegating contemporary human experience under the weight of the historical reconstructions of the professional readers.

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19 For example see Francis Watson, Church, Text and World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994). Debate continues between biblical historical critics and biblical theologians, especially in the UK, as a result of Watson's publication.

20 So Krister Stendahl, 'Biblical Theology, Contemporary,' Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Vol. 1, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 418-432; reprinted as 'Biblical Theology: A Program,' in Krister Stendahl, Meanings (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

21 Christopher Rowland, 'In Dialogue With Itumeleng Mosala: A Contribution To Liberation Exegesis', Journal for the Study of the New Testament 50,1993, p. 56.

22 The primary focus in all groups conducted was 'what does the text mean for you today?' In my role as the facilitator interventions that introduced historical-critical material was deliberately resisted. I was interested in discovering if the readers could interpret the text without these critical tools and from the perspective of their contemporary experience.

This study will explore to what extent the readings affirm that particular (contextual) contemporary readings, by ordinary real-readers, are a valid contribution to the overall hermeneutic process, precisely because they are unfettered from historical issues. This will not require an abandonment of the historical-critical approach. It recognises the history of interpretation as an essential conversation partner for ordinary readings with a contemporary focus. The localised or contextual nature of the readings also recognises the 'universal' traditions of the church as already shaping to a certain extent the readings of the ordinary readers. As Richard correctly observes; 'The Bible . . . is not a neutral book, but a book already profoundly interpreted over hundreds of years of tradition of biblical interpretation in the context of the dominant European and occidental culture'.[23]

5. The readings collected and transcribed as part of this research are localised and contextual. The inner city or urban location of the readers, as well as their corresponding social location as disadvantaged and/or marginalised, is distinctive. Most readers, particularly those from Glebe and Woolloomooloo, are part of a non-literary or non-book culture. In this context most 'theology' or talk of God is oral, and external to the institutional church. As Kenneth Leech has suggested this type of *urban* theology is a theology 'done under stress', where the issues of life and death are very real.[24] Consequently the readings transcribed provide a significant opportunity to analyse the '*effect* of a text in a particular context and the way in which that context conditions interpretation'.[25] The way in which context, and social and ecclesial location shape and inform the readers, will be crucial to the analysis of the readings in the Gospel of Luke in chapter four.

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23 Richard, p. 310.

24 Kenneth Leech, unpublished Urban Theology Lecture, Mansfield College, Oxford, October 2nd 1994.

25 Rowland, 'Dialogue', p. 56. (italics Rowland's).

Limitations to the Study

1. Particularity is an unavoidable limitation of the study. As Andrew Dutney suggests, 'A *particular* Christian community, like any association of people, can no more be everywhere than it is nowhere. It must be somewhere *in particular*.'[26] The particular location for the conduct of this study is Sydney, Australia. The city of Sydney is located on the eastern seaboard of Australia in the state of New South Wales. This specific location needs to be identified as a possible limitation in a study that attempts to engage in the wider hermeneutic conversation. The ordinary readers and the author are 'in Australia'.[27]

However the recognition of the irreducibility of particularity in our post-modern world,[28] invites the conclusion that this limitation is authentic.[29] As Dutney suggests 'Faith is expressed authentically only as faith in location'.[30] Kelly also argues, '. . . meanings make sense only within the presuppositions of a given culture . . . being Australian colours the horizon in which we locate, see and interpret life's mysteries. It affects our deepest meanings and values, all the ways we "see life"'.[31] This concept of contextualisation is not a new one. Its influence on the process of interpretation of biblical texts in Sydney's theological-ecclesial context has only recently been acknowledged or analysed. [32]

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26 Andrew Dutney, From Here To Where?: Australian Christians Owning the Past-Embracing the Future (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988), p. 2. (italics Dutney's).

27 So Tony Kelly: 'We may have to live with the likelihood that the Australian context will be of no special interest to the international discipline of theology. It is hard to see how it will have the paradigmatic appeal of, say, South American Liberation Theology, or of modern European 'post-Auschwitz' reflection, of North American political theology, or of the more mystical theologies emerging in Asia. Perhaps we are too late in the game . . .' in 'Theology in an Australian Context' in Malone, p. 49.

28 So Watson, Church, pp. 81f.

29 Following Dutney's suggestion that particularity is an 'authenticating limitation', citing Karl Barth's 'fourth and innermost circle', in Church Dogmatics, I.1, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark: 1936), pp. 104-106. in From Here to Where?, p. 2 .

30 Ibid., p. 4.

31 Kelly, in Malone, p. 52-53.

32 In Australia, 'contextual theology' has only recently received attention. For example: V. C. Hayes, (Ed.), Toward Theology in an Australian Context (Bedford Park: AASR, 1979), Frank Engel, Australian Christians in Conflict and Unity (Melbourne: JBCE, 1984), Jim Houston (Ed), The Cultured Pearl: Australian Readings in Cross-Cultural Theology and Mission (Melbourne: VCC, 1986), and G. W. Trompf (Ed.), The Gospel is not Western: Black Theologies from the Southwest Pacific (New York: Orbis, 1987).

2. Another possible limitation to the study is the fact that many of those engaged in the reading process of this study were located in the inner city suburbs of Woolloomooloo, Kings Cross, Surry Hills, Redfern and Glebe, all predominantly 'public housing estates', with the exception of Kings Cross, the 'red-light' district of Sydney.[33] Not all the readers were literate, and many were from a non-book culture. Their theological reflections were oral rather than written.[34] For many it will be an obvious limitation to the study, that those engaged in the process of reading and interpreting the text from this particular location read the text 'pre-critically'.[35] The assumption however that ordinary real-readers read 'pre-critically' will be reviewed in chapter five. Ordinary real-readers of the text may tend to be parochial, given to flights of fancy, their readings not constrained by the 'objective' rules of the professionals. Suggesting their readings have value for contemporary biblical interpretation is a path fraught with danger, for readers without the critical tools of the European-American academies can be too easily dismissed.

Exploring alternative reading locations, free from the constraints or controls of those in academic or ecclesial power must not lead to or excuse 'arbitrary and inadequate exegesis of foundational texts'.[36] This limitation, once recognised however, highlights the importance of dialogue and conversation with other readers from professional locations, in order to guard against parochial and fanciful readings, while at the same time allowing for pre-critical readings to be compared and contrasted with those from the 'critical' paradigm.

3. Recognition that 'readings' by the professional readers in the church and academies are not value-neutral and reflect their (often unrecognised) ideological

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33 Public housing is Government owned, available to low income individuals and families.

34 Non-book culture is not a unique Australian reality. See for example Patrick A. Kalilombe, 'A Malawian Example: The Bible and Non-literate Communities' in Sugirtharajah, Voices, pp. 397-411.

35 As Stephen Moore points out, quoting from William Ray Literary Meaning: From Phenomenology to Deconstruction (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 'the biblical guild, like all guilds, enforces strict rules of accreditation', and those working outside the accepted 'rules of accreditation' will find their work often dismissed'; in Literary Criticism, p.105.

36 Andrew Kirk, 'A Different Task: Liberation Theology and Local Theologies' in Anthony Harvey, (Ed), Theology in the City : A Theological Response to 'Faith in the City' (London: SPCK, 1989), p.18.

commitments, in turn requires recognition that a limitation of the readings of ordinary real-readers is that they themselves will not be free of ideological commitments, including dominant ideology. Dominant ideologies however do not necessarily penetrate disadvantaged and marginalised real-readers to the point of overwhelming particular interests shaped and informed by their location and experience of marginalisation and disadvantage. While professional readers have claimed objective and value-neutral readings, or have been shy of foregrounding ideological and theological commitments, it is acknowledged from the outset of this study, that the readings of the ordinary readers are ideologically 'loaded'. This limitation, once foregrounded, becomes an potential asset in the process of dialogue and conversation with professional readings, as the presuppositions and ideological commitments of the disadvantaged and marginalised real-readers, contrast with and therefore may expose or reveal the presuppositions and ideological commitments of professional readers. The possibility that ordinary readings outside the dominant class in church and society can assist in revealing where biblical interpretation is captive to a particular ideology, remains to be analysed.

4. A further limitation to be recognised is the 'constructed' nature of the reading groups. With the exception of the Military Chaplains group,[37] all the reading groups met at my invitation. As such these groups were 'my construction', rather than what may be considered to be a more 'natural' grouping together of people from the inner city of Sydney to read the Lukan text. This limitation is acknowledged, and addressed through a process of analysis that includes the context in which the groups were established, and an analysis of my facilitation and interventions[38].

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37 I was invited to facilitate a bible study with military chaplains at Victoria Barracks in Sydney, and with their permission, adopted the same reading approach as in all other groups.

38 The system of coding utilised to analyse my interventions is based on the work of D. Kennard, J. Roberts & D. White, A Workbook of Group Analysis Interventions (London: Routledge, 1993), discussed in detail in chapter two.

My role as a 'trained' reader is identified, with a relationship of trust between myself and the readers crucial to the study. In addition to my role, the expectations of readers with regard to this reading process may also be considered a limitation. The extent to which readers felt free to 'read' and 'interpret' outside the expectations of church communities and traditions is also explored in the analysis, and recognised when this expectation appears to produce an 'acceptable' reading of the text, either to me as facilitator, or to the other readers present in the group.

With these limitations and challenges in mind, before we proceed to discuss a theoretical basis for the study and the process used in the reading groups, it is useful to review ordinary reading projects that others have completed.

Review of 'ordinary reading' Projects to date:

1. Ernesto Cardenal

The transcribed commentary of *campesinos* in pre-Sandinista Nicaragua, discussing a variety of biblical passages, is a well known collection of readings facilitated by Ernesto Cardenal, and published in English in four volumes as The Gospel in Solentiname.

Cardenal's explanation of the reading process is brief. At worship each Sunday the sermon was replaced with a reading of the gospels by those present, facilitated by Cardenal. The gospel for the day was read aloud, as some of those participating could not read, and then discussed verse by verse.[39]

Cardenal's introduction identifies the diversity of those participating, including brief comments regarding the participant's political affiliations.[40] Acknowledging the *campesinos* as the authors of the 'commentaries', Cardenal continues to

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39 Cardenal, Vol. 1, pp. v-vi.
40 Ibid., p. vii.

acknowledge the reader's diversity with reference to the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the commentaries.[41]

Both Cardenal and members of the communities surrounding Solentiname were, and became increasingly engaged in the struggle to end the dictatorship of Somoza. Each of the volumes contains an 'epilogue', in which Cardenal explains that following the destruction of the Solentiname community by the Nicaraguan National Guard, he had joined the Sandinistas. Cardenal went on to become the Minister of Culture in the Sandinista government after its victory in 1979.

The four volumes contain 116 transcripts of a variety of Gospel passages. Cardenal, as facilitator and local priest, provides on many occasions historical information or 'expert' interpretive material, to assist the discussion of the *campesinos,* a discussion more focussed on contemporary issues. These interventions take a variety of forms. Some are a re-translation of the Protestant translation of the Gospels *Dios llega al hombre* being used,[42] while others provided Old Testament background material,[43] historical information relating to the first century setting of the Gospels[44] as well as Cardenal's summary or interpretation.[45] The correspondence between the Gospel story being read and the contemporary story of the readers is a common theme throughout the commentaries.[46]

Cardenal's reading with the *campesinos* has been received in a variety of different ways. For many, The Gospel in Solentiname, has been a formative and innovative model upon which to build. Cardenal is recognised by Gerald West as a positive example of an 'organic intellectual' - a trained reader engaged in the reading process with ordinary readers.[47]

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41 Ibid., p. viii.
42 E.g., Ibid., Vol. 1, p.13, Vol. 2, p. 5.
43 E.g., Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 41.
44 E.g., Ibid., Vol. 1, p.119, Vol. 3, p. 39.
45 E.g., Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 90, pp. 187-188.
46 E.g., Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 73.
47 West, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 80.

However the readings from Solentiname have also been understood by many to be naive, simplistic, and pre-critical. They have been readily dismissed. Anthony Thiselton makes brief mention of Cardenal's transcripts in his chapter 'The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theologies and Feminist Theologies: Socio-Critical and Socio-Pragmatic Strands' in New Horizons in Hermeneutics. Thiselton's concern with The Gospel in Solentiname is that the *campesino's* readings do not adequately recognise the tension between the text and the present, a tension Hans-George Gadamer insisted was necessary for there to be an authentic 'fusion of horizons'.[48] Thiselton indirectly suggests these readings are a naive assimilation of the text into the present horizon of the *campesinos*, and does not discuss their contribution to the process of liberation theology. In spite of Thiselton's agreement with Juan Luis Segundo that there are two strands of liberation theology, one represented by university-trained theologians, the other represented by those who live with the poor and oppressed and learn from them, the latter receives scant attention. The 'theoretical' strand receives dense consideration for the remaining fifty or so pages of the chapter.[49]

Thiselton includes discussion of Cardenal's work, in reaction to the suggestion by Rowland and Corner[50] that readings from Base Christian Communities in Central and Latin America with little 'critical distance' or historical understanding, are readings where there is a fusion of horizons. However Rowland and Corner place Cardenal's work more specifically in the category of 'correspondence of terms' following Clodovis Boff's identification of two ways of reading the Bible.[51] They

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48 Thiselton, New Horizons, p. 412.

49 Ibid., pp. 412-419.

50 C. Rowland & M. Corner, Liberating Exegesis : The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989)

51 Ibid., pp. 54-59. A 'correspondence of terms' approach reads the text with the understanding that Christian communities today live in a world which is similar, if not identical, to the world in which Jesus lived - hence little or no critical distancing takes place. Boff's other category, which Boff suggests is the more appropriate one, is the 'correspondence of relationships' approach which reads the text as a form of mediation of the story of Jesus, which requires use of modern critical tools to appropriate the text in the contemporary world. The latter identifies the two different contexts that exist between Scripture in its context and the reader in her/his context.

acknowledge that some of the readings from Solentiname appear to assume a naive fit between the text and contemporary experience, but they note Cardenal's contribution to the reading process with his injection of historical critical material, was one way in which a simplistic 'correspondence of terms' approach was modified. They conclude:

> The Gospel in Solentiname illustrates that the 'correspondence of terms' approach provides an important challenge to the idea that the gospel is simply a historical narrative about the past. It rightly bases its interpretation upon the need to understand the biblical tradition in the context of current events.[52]

Cardenal's work, criticism and praise not with-standing, has initiated the collection and interpretation of readings by ordinary readers in a variety of places throughout the world. We will return to the Gospel in Solentiname in chapter four, as a conversation partner in the process of the analysis of the ordinary readings transcribed as part of this study.

2. Gerald West

Gerald West's work in the area of contextual bible study with 'ordinary' readers was first published in South Africa in 1991 by Cluster Publications during the apartheid era.[53] While the socio-political crisis has abated in his country, West argues that the interpretative crisis has deepened.[54]

He identifies the purpose of his study as 'to reflect on what it means to interpret the Bible in a context of cultural crisis'[55] both within the local South African context and also the wider context of biblical hermeneutics and biblical studies. Analysis and clarification of the interpretive questions that arise within this context of

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52 Ibid., p. 58.
53 West, Biblical Hermeneutics. This original work has been republished in a revised second edition by Orbis post apartheid.
54 Ibid., p. 8.
55 Ibid., p.15.

'struggle'[56] is based on texts, not exclusively the texts of academically trained readers, but also on the 'sermons, prayers, songs, proverbs, poems and newspapers' of the ordinary readers of the Bible.[57]

West identifies the 'ordinary' reader as follows:

> I use the term "reader" in the phrase "ordinary reader" to allude to the shift in hermeneutics towards the reader. . . . However, my use of the term "reader" is metaphoric in that it *includes* the many who are illiterate, but who listen to, discuss, and retell the Bible. The term "ordinary" is used in a general and specific sense. The general usage includes all readers who read the Bible pre-critically. I also use the term "ordinary" to designate a particular sector of pre-critical readers, those readers who are poor and oppressed (including, of course women). [58]

Identifying himself as a 'white, middle-class, South African male', West argues that the interface between the ordinary reader and the trained professional reader of the text can overcome the difficulties such a process suggests on the basis of two 'onlys'. Firstly he suggests 'I can only do this by moving beyond "speaking for", and beyond "listening to" the poor and oppressed, towards "speaking to / [with]" the poor and oppressed.'[59] This is crucial for any interface between ordinary readings of the text and those from the academies and church hierarchies. If we only 'listen to' West argues, we 'presuppose a voice of a wholly self-knowing subject free from ideology' and subsequently we 'romanticise and idealise the contribution of the poor'. If we see ourselves (as trained readers) only 'speaking for' we can deny the subject status of the poor and oppressed altogether and consequently 'minimise and rationalise the contribution of the poor'.[60] West then argues that the process will work only if the power relations in the interface

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56 Ibid., p.16.

57 Ibid., p.17.

58 West, 'Difference and Dialogue: Reading The Joseph Story With Poor and Marginalised Communities in South Africa', Biblical Interpretation 2.2,1994, p.155, ftnt. 4. See also West, Contextual Bible Study (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), pp. 8-9. Note that this definition also appears as a footnote to the Afterword in the Orbis edition of Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 319, ftnt.2. See also p.19.

59 West, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 213; also pp. 223-224.

60 Ibid.

between the ordinary and the intellectually trained reader are foregrounded. They cannot be obliterated or ignored.[61]

In Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context West devotes two chapters to an analysis of this context, and then three chapters to various issues around the role of the reader and biblical hermeneutics (as expressed by both South African theologians and those from outside this context) before arriving at examples of particular readings by ordinary readers in chapter seven. In this chapter West discusses a series of case studies located in Anglican parishes, in the trades-unions, in the Young Christian Workers and in the African Independent Churches. [62]

West does not include any record or transcript of the actual 'readings' in any of these case studies, but rather an outline of the process and an analysis of the transcripts of the 'readings' that resulted. West's approach to readings in Anglican parishes, provides a good example of the process adopted in his work.

This was a task undertaken with the assistance of other researchers who were all trained bible study students and who had also received some training in the role of facilitating group discussion. In order to minimise intrusion, researchers worked in parishes with which they shared a similar background to facilitate ordinary readers 'reading the Bible *in an authentic and familiar setting*'.[63]

West's commitment to a 'close reading' of the text or a 'commitment to reading the Bible critically'[64] is the point at which his concept of trained readers reading *with* untrained readers comes into sharpest focus.[65] Consequently in his readings in Anglican parishes the research material had both a Group Profile Questionnaire and a Bible Study Outline, the latter designed to facilitate group discussion of two

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., pp. 174-200.
63 Ibid., p.176. (italics West's).
64 Ibid., pp. 224-227.
65 Ibid., p. 226.

questions: '(a) "What do you think this story meant in the time of Jesus?" and (b) "What do you think this story means for us today?".[66] In the example provided (Mark 10:17-22), there follows another twenty-nine questions put together by West and his researchers. These questions appear to be their contribution, or part of their contribution, to reading *with* the non-trained readers of the text.

In his analysis West makes the following preliminary observations.[67] The ordinary readers had a readiness to apply the text and their understanding of it to their own contemporary life experiences. He identifies this as a highly significant hermeneutic factor.[68]

The readers had the freedom to apply and read the text without the assistance of 'expert' knowledge. West concludes that whether they ought to interpret biblical texts without this knowledge is a different question from whether they can interpret biblical texts without 'expert' knowledge.[69]

Apart from the information in the text itself, there was generally little knowledge of historical or sociological extratextual information. Some group members had some idea of the historical background to the text but '. . . the scarcity or vagueness of this sort of information was not perceived as a serious problem in the groups' appropriation of the text.'[70]

The groups generally did not sustain a close or literary reading of the text, or make a 'concerted effort to read the text as a whole in its own right'.[71] The text was read 'canonically', as part of the Christian scriptures. The readers also read Mark 10:17-22 in light of other parts of the Bible, particularly their understanding of the

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66 Ibid., p.176.
67 West stresses the fact that when Biblical Hermeneutics was published the observations offered were preliminary, p.305, ftnt. 8.
68 Ibid., p.177.
69 Ibid., p.178.
70 Ibid., p.181.
71 Ibid.

'central message of the Bible'.[72] Consequently none of the groups viewed Mark as a distinct literary unit but rather as part of the larger biblical story.

Significantly, West observes that the readings highlight that people read the text in light of their life experiences, what he terms 'reading existentially'.[73] These experiences provide people with different pre-understandings which they bring to the reading of the text. West expresses concern over the lack of analysis by the readers, a reflection of the oppressive nature of the South African context, and also the need for readers to have resources and processes that facilitate the development of analytical skills.[74]

West makes two further observations. Within most groups there was a tension about whether the story should be read materially or spiritually, with most groups producing a dualistic response.[75] Secondly the majority of the groups were comfortable with the concept of 'corporate Bible study' with only two of the groups being more indoctrinated by the 'teacher talk' approach.[76]

Following analysis of the other case studies West concludes there is no 'typical' ordinary reader and that 'equally clearly, there is need for more participatory research with ordinary readers.'[77]

He notes however as this research continues that complex and difficult questions will surface, not the least of which is how the ordinary reader is 'located' in the wider interpretive debate.[78] While there are similarities between the modes of reading of ordinary readers and the modes of reading of expert readers, West identifies a crucial difference. Ordinary readers read the Bible pre-critically.[79]

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72 Ibid., p.182..
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., pp. 183-184.
75 Ibid., p.184.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., p.198.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.

This crucial difference must be recognised, as well as the 'complexity of the readings of ordinary readers, when we 'admit the poor and marginalised, ordinary readers, into the debate'.[80] West concludes:

> Methodological analysis and clarification among trained readers is not sufficient, particularly among those committed to reading the Bible in contexts of liberation. Such contexts demand that ordinary readers join the discussion. A first step in this direction requires a willingness to discover who the ordinary readers are and how they are reading the Bible. A second step in this direction requires that we honestly analyse the relationship between the trained reader and the ordinary reader in liberation hermeneutics.[81]

The interface between the trained reader and the non-trained reader is West's ongoing concern in his 1994 article 'Difference and Dialogue' to which we have already referred, and his more recent work in Semeia 73.[82] Building on his conclusion above, he identifies how reception hermeneutics has introduced to the reading process an active reader in the creation of meaning. The logic of this introduction demands the presence in the interpretative process of ordinary real readers.[83] We will return to this interface when we consider the implications of this study for the hermeneutic process.

Finally, West identifies three modes of reading the Bible, even though 'trained readers leave their universities or seminaries with the view that there is only one way of reading the Bible.'[84] West argues that reading behind the text, reading the text (or in the text) for literary and theological insights and reading in front of the text for new possibilities for contemporary living, are not as incompatible modes of reading as previously supposed, especially in terms of a liberationist approach. We will return to this aspect of West's study, to consider which mode of reading is accessible and appropriate for ordinary readers of the text.

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80 Ibid., p. 200.
81 Ibid., Cp. 'Difference and Dialogue', ftnt. no. 5 p.156.
82 West, 'Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated', Semeia 73, pp. 21-41.
83 Ibid., p. 27.
84 West, Contextual Bible Study, p. 24.

3. David Sinclair

David Sinclair's thesis, 'The Influence of Power and Class On The Biblical Interpretation of Church Members',[85] analyses the readings of ordinary readers, in six Bible studies. The purpose of this analysis is to examine how these readings are affected, in both church and society, by social background and power relations and to answer three questions posed by Sinclair: 'Is it true that those who are in different social classes read the Bible differently? Is it true that such a difference has liberative potential? And if it is true, why is it that such potential has remained untapped?'[86] The six Bible studies were conducted with members of the Church of Scotland, meeting in groups, from three different congregations.

Sinclair argues, to answer these questions, one has to look to social theory and to theories of ideological domination, not just in society, but in the church as well.[87] How power and class impact upon the interpretation of ordinary readers, 'between social groups *within* the church' is a central concern of the thesis, as is the connection between class and power within the church.[88] He concludes Britain is not a post-class society, but still dominated by class issues.[89]

Sinclair acknowledges his research is influenced by how the Bible has been read and appropriated in Latin America, specifically acknowledging the work of Ernesto Cardenal, Paolo Friere and Carlos Mesters.[90] As the theme of power is interwoven with the theme of hermeneutics, Sinclair identifies the 'hypothesis being examined . . . is that universal theology is in fact the local theology of a particular and powerful group' and that the effect of this domination 'is the rendering dumb' of those who are not members of the dominant group or share that group's

85 David Sinclair, 'The Influence of Power and Class On The Biblical Interpretation of Church Members'.
86 Ibid.
87 Cp. John Millbank, Theology and Social Theory : Beyond Secular Theory (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), discussed by Sinclair, pp. 2-3 of his thesis.
88 Ibid., p. 3. (italics mine).
89 Ibid., p. 28.
90 Ibid., pp. 4-5; also p. 45.

experiences.[91] In analysing this dominant group Sinclair turns to the work of Frank Parkin and Antonio Gramsci, specifically Gramsci's concept of hegemony.[92]

Local theology is central to the whole idea of the study: 'encounter with local reality can provide a whole new perspective for universal theory and that therefore theology must take into account local circumstances and experiences or it will fail to touch real life'.[93]

Concluding his introductory chapter Sinclair suggests the development of liberative theology in Scotland must take into account the factor of power at work in any enterprise that involves understanding; the continuing importance of social class; the realistic possibility of class influence on church life and faith and the importance all this has for an understanding of local theology. [94]

Sinclair's research with groups used both biblical and other texts by way of a mixture of vignette and conversation techniques, generally described as qualitative research. [95]

Six Bible studies around specific topics were conducted. The topics and texts covered were in the following order: Poverty: Luke 4:16-21, Suffering: Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Oppression: Ezekiel 22:23-31, Liberation: Exodus 3:7-12, Justice: Matthew 25:31-46 and Worship: Luke 1: 46-55. Each topic also had a series of 'secondary quotations' drawn from a variety of theologians, politicians, sociologists, philosophers and others, 'whose words could shed light on a passage or point up some particular facet which might otherwise have slipped by unnoticed'.[96]

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91 Ibid., p. 6.
92 Ibid., pp. 6-11.
93 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
94 Ibid., p. 43.
95 Sinclair cites the work of Martin Bulmer Working Class Images of Society and the work of Janet Finch, 'The Vingette Technique in Survey Research', to support the approach summarised above, Ibid., pp. 49-50.
96 Ibid., p. 54.

These 'secondary quotations' were used in the studies to provide a range of opinions that would produce 'approval or condemnation'.[97] Consequently secondary quotes became an integral part of the discussion and interpretation, a point to which we shall return. Essential for the reading process was the participant's life experience. Readers were invited to 'put the biblical passage alongside the comments of the writers and to put both alongside *their own experience*'. [98]

Sinclair also foregrounds another concern. Sinclair is not coy in acknowledging that a large percentage of the secondary quotations come from liberation theologians as he wants to test the suggestion that liberation theology is more acceptable to those from an 'underside' social location and that its application is not just to cases of extreme poverty, but also to cultures of relative poverty and affluence.[99]

Sinclair identifies the ordinary readers involved in the three reading groups, by social location rather than name. He does not name the locations where the readings took place rather providing broad descriptions of the locality.

Sinclair examines each topic and the group responses in the following six chapters before arriving at some overall conclusions.[100]

In Chapter nine 'The Use of the Bible' the aim is to discover the influences which create the thinking of the participants and to analyse hermeneutic themes relevant to the question: 'what are the ways in which the bible is being interpreted?'. [101] Life experience is linked with reading and the life experience of oppression and suffering with epistemological privilege, and the appropriation of the text. Sinclair

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97 Ibid.., p. 49, & pp. 54-55.

98 Ibid., p. 57. (italics mine).

99 Ibid., p. 55.

100 Space does not permit discussion of the analysis and conclusions of each topic. However Sinclair's analysis of the Lukan passages will be included in discussion in chapter four of this study.

101 Ibid.

notes that the most marginalised or oppressed group engaged in the studies, Group C, was the only group to be consistent in their reading: 'only the people there made the link between power, wealth and oppression both when coming at it from the "poverty end" and the "oppression end"'.[102]

Sinclair continues his analysis by asking what can be done to challenge the mechanisms of power and influence in the church, and whether or not a hermeneutic of suspicion can be developed to facilitate sufficiently the appropriation talked of above.

Consequently in Chapter ten, 'Dominant Ideology and Meaning Systems', Sinclair returns to the work of Antonio Gramsci and Frank Parkin to reinforce his earlier contention that a dominant ideology exists, not only in society, but in the church also. The question of how readings from the 'underside' can engage in a process of conversation with the dominant theology of the Church of Scotland leads Sinclair to argue for the development of 'organic intellectuals, or 'people's theologians'.[103] Sinclair's discussion of these issues will be included in chapter five of this study when we consider the implications this thesis has for the hermeneutic process.

Sinclair includes only one transcript of the reading groups in an appendix to the thesis. This is a full transcript of the discussion that took place in Group C on 'Oppression', the text being Ezekiel 22:23-31. A brief analysis of this transcript and the process and focus of the discussion points to some particular aspects of Sinclair's approach that require further consideration. He describes the opening process.

> The passage from Ezekiel was read and briefly explained as being from the time of the exile in Babylon - Ezekiel's task being to point out to the people of Israel that they deserved their fate. The first question in the study was then addressed: - where does oppression come from? The

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102 Ibid., pp. 272-273.

103 Sinclair discusses Antonio Gramsci's concept of the 'organic intellectual, and Laurie Green's concept of the 'people's theologian' in Ibid., pp. 367-368.

> quotations from Weil, Hanks, Gutierrez and Tamez were read through.[104]

Sinclair's first recorded intervention refers repeatedly to, and provides a brief interpretation of, the secondary quotations.[105] Responses by readers to the first question in this study focus on the secondary quotations. Discussion of the Ezekiel text does not surface in the transcript, apart from the introductory remarks made by Sinclair. It is also apparent that the language used in the secondary quotations demands a level of literacy that one might not expect, especially of Group C. Three of the quotations provide historical material. One is unsure to what extent the participants were dependent upon Sinclair's input as the 'expert', or indeed the expertise of those providing the secondary quotations. Sinclair's opening comments include interpretation of the secondary quotations, prior to any group discussion.

In the transcript that follows, reference to the Ezekiel text surfaces on only four further occasions, all during Sinclair's interventions. At no time does a participant directly refer to the biblical text or offer their own interpretation of the meaning of the text. Participants referred in generalised terms to Matthew, Genesis and Romans, but only in passing, not as a point of interpretation. Engagement with the topic of oppression appears to take place through discussion of the secondary quotations, rather than the biblical text itself. The readers do respond to the questions and quotations out of their own life experience. However it is difficult to find in the discussion a reading of the *biblical* text in light of their own life experiences.

This transcript confirmed what appeared throughout the analysis of the studies provided in the thesis. The group's 'readings' were focussed primarily on the secondary quotations, rather than the biblical texts. Sinclair's analysis is based on

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104 Ibid., p. 378. The quotations referred to are contained in the body of the thesis on pp.124 - 125.

105 Ibid.

group responses to the secondary quotations more so than upon their responses directly to the biblical text. While Sinclair explains in the thesis that the secondary quotations are meant to function as a useful tool to engage participants in the discussion,[106] it appears the end result is a study of responses to these quotes, rather than a study of how ordinary readers read the biblical material. It appears that the biblical text recedes into the background, with the secondary quotes in the foreground. It is feasible to ask to what extent did the words of the professional theologians and other experts through the secondary quotations silence, or shape and inform the readings of the church members engaged in the process?

Given these possible limitations however, Sinclair makes an invaluable contribution to the process of foregrounding the place of the ordinary reader in reading the Bible. The thesis offers some strong challenges to the church and its collusion with dominant ideologies, and the marginalisation of its own members through class and power.

4. Others

Inspired by the work of Ernesto Cardenal, the editor of the International Review of Mission published transcripts of reading groups from Indonesia, South Africa, the United States, Poland, Hong Kong and Guatemala in the October 1977 edition of the journal.[107] The passages, Luke 4:16-30 and Luke 5:1-11, were read in terms of the nature of mission in the localities of the readers.

The Hong Kong group was facilitated by Raymond Fung and was made up of eleven factory workers and a clerk. Not all members of the group were Christians. Description of the participants is provided by Fung along with some of his own interpretation of the responses to questions arising from the reading of Luke 5:1-

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106 Ibid., p. 49.

107 Emilio Castro, (Ed.), 'Commentaries By The People', International Review of Mission LXVI, 264,1977, pp. 311-338.

13.[108] Fung's introduction to the study is brief, and his background to the passage limited to the comment: 'the Jews had been under foreign domination for a long time, and they longed for deliverance.'[109]

The only other reference to the historical location of the text is when a participant inquires 'I wonder how Jesus must have felt at the time?' to which Fung replies 'I wish I knew'.[110] Discussion is focussed on the contemporary experience of the readers, especially the manner in which the fishermen in the story relate to their contemporary experience as factory workers. As the brief introduction to the transcript indicates 'The leader's goal was to enable the workers to sense the relevancy between their lives and the Scriptures. The method used, therefore, was to try to identify experiences common to the participants and the characters in the Gospel story.'[111]

The second transcript is from Solo in Indonesia where the group was comprised of both professional and volunteer community workers involved in welfare related work amongst the poor.[112] Again participants are briefly described, one being a Muslim. The facilitator of the group, Josef Wadyatmadja, does not appear to make any comments during the short study. The text was Luke 5:1-13. Historical background can perhaps be assumed, but the discussion centres around the contemporary issues for the workers, particularly income equality and the distribution of funds to the poor.

The third example is from a public housing community in North Minneapolis.[113] The participants, five in number, are described as local 'leaders of the common folk who had a year ago tried to stop the Housing Authority bulldozers from tearing

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108 Ibid., pp. 313-318.
109 Ibid., p. 313.
110 Ibid., p. 318.
111 Ibid., p. 313.
112 Ibid., p. 319-321. This 'commentary' is also published in Sugirtharajah, Voices, Part Five 'People as Exegetes', pp. 420-422.
113 Ibid., pp. 321-327.

down some fifty units they believed were needed by low-income people'.[114] Four of the participants were black (the surrounding community was 80% black), while the white member was the coordinator of a Centre for Communication and Development. This group appears to be facilitated by 'Joe', the white member of the group. The text was Luke 4: 16-30. Discussion in this group moves between the meaning of the text in its historical setting, and what it meant for the participants in their contemporary experience. Consequently some of the questions take the form of '. . . how would Jesus be considered in all this?'[115] and 'what's good news to you?'[116]

The transcript from Poland are notes taken at plenary sessions after groups of three had discussed Luke 4: 16-30. All were members of a parish church in the Krakow suburb of Nowa Huta, where they had for some years struggled to erect a church in the face of state opposition.[117] A significant contrast to the discussion of the group in North Minneapolis is the interpretation of verses 18 and 19. For the Polish group the 'poor' are identified as 'those who lack faith and don't have God's closeness', while the American group clearly appropriated the 'good news to the poor' to their own context and struggle'.[118] It is also apparent that the Polish readers had access to historical information surrounding the text, and made use of that material to arrive at their interpretations, although the emphasis of the study was on how people react to issues the story raised in their contemporary context.

The last transcript comes from South Africa. This is a reading of Luke 4 by a mixed coloured group of 'activists' in a context of 'squatter crises' and 'black unrest'.[119] The group's facilitator, Margaret Nash, sets the agenda in her opening comments: 'Maybe we could pretend we are going to make a television film of the

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114 Ibid., p. 321.
115 Ibid., p. 325.
116 Ibid., p. 323.
117 Ibid., pp. 327-331.
118 Ibid., p. 329, cp. pp. 323.
119 Ibid., p. 332. This 'commentary' is also published in Sugirtharajah, Voices, Part Five 'People as Exegetes', pp. 423-430.

incident, first as it happened, then, later, as it might appear in our situation'.[120] Consequently the approach is to locate the text in its context as the readers are able, and then to consider what the story means for them in their contemporary context.

As Emilio Castro's editorial remarks indicate the process was pursued in order that dialogue between the 'story of the biblical text' and 'the stories of the individuals and groups' might find relevance and relationship to the reader's 'immediate predicament, and the world in which they live.'[121]

Conclusion

The work of Cardenal, West, Sinclair and others engaged in the process of collecting and interpreting the readings of ordinary readers are essential antecedents to a study of this nature. Each study establishes a valid place for ordinary readers of biblical texts who do not inhabit the hermeneutic space of the academies or the church. To varying degrees they illustrate that ordinary readers can, and do, interpret biblical texts. They acknowledge that history reveals that these interpretations have, by and large, been ignored (or perhaps deliberately silenced), by those who enjoy the power of interpretation through their professional positions in either church or university.

We are then left with a number of questions. What are the possibilities for ordinary real-readers to read the text, free, where possible, from the constraints of dominant interpretive approaches, and where their contemporary experience of life is acknowledged as the filter through which they can read the text? What are the possibilities such readings have for the overall hermeneutic program, especially if such readers are embodied in marginalised and impoverished social locations, within an overall affluent context? What can such readings offer, through dialogue

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120 Ibid.
121 Ibid., p. 309.

or conversation with the professional readings of biblical texts to contemporary understanding of first century texts? What method or methods might be developed, on the basis of the work above, that attempt to allow for the readings of ordinary real-readers to surface? And what of the ideological commitments of the ordinary real-readers? To what extent can these commitments be identified, and to what extent can they, in turn, lead to an identification of the ideological commitments of those with interpretive power in church and university?

What can ordinary real-readers offer in terms of an understanding of the use of the Bible today?

In order to consider these issues, we commence with a discussion of the process utilised in this study, building on the work of those we have discussed, that allows for the readings of ordinary real-readers to surface within the author's particular context. We will then discuss the extent to which postmodern theorising provides a basis for the process of reading undertaken as part of this study. Essential to this process will be the recognition of the particular context and location of the readers, which we will consider in some detail, before engaging the readings transcribed in Volume Two in a process of dialogue with professional readings of the Gospel of Luke. Finally we will draw some initial conclusions regarding the implications for contemporary hermeneutics.

Theory and Process

Real-Readers and the Reading Process.

Volume Two of this thesis contains the transcripts of a number of 'reading groups', comprised of ordinary real-readers. These reading groups were invited to meet within the context in which the author lives and works, the inner city suburbs of Woolloomooloo, Kings Cross, Redfern, Darlinghurst and Glebe, in the city of Sydney. As the detailed analysis of this particular context makes clear in chapter three of this thesis, the majority of readers involved in the reading groups were people from poor and disadvantaged social locations and/or marginalised ecclesial locations, with the exception of the military chaplains' reading group, who were more representative of a middle-class social location and a centralised ecclesial location. Apart from this group of military chaplains, all other readers were known to the author of this paper through two inner city Baptist worshipping communities, one in Glebe and one in Woolloomooloo. At the time of the reading groups the author's wife was the Pastor of the Woolloomooloo Fellowship, and consequently involved in the reading groups. These churches were part of the wider responsibility and ministry of Baptist Inner City Ministries, an organisation working in the inner city of Sydney. The author is the Director of Baptist Inner City Ministries, and has been involved in this work for twelve years. The theological distinctives of Baptist Inner City Ministries, developed in 1997 with many of the readers involved in this study, are included in discussion of the local context in chapter three, and as an example of a 'local theology'.

Baptist Inner City Ministries, in addition to church planting in inner city suburbs (where the church has been in decline for some generations), also provides a number of projects and programs designed to empower people in the inner city who are homeless, suffering from addictions, sex-workers, urban Aboriginals,

parents with children who are repeat offenders, unemployed, public housing tenants, suffering from poverty, sole parent families or with mental health issues. The readers were invited to participate at the personal invitation of the author, with the exception of the military chaplains who invited the author to lead a series of bible studies for them at Victoria Barracks.

All the reading groups were taped with the permission of the readers participating. All the readers with the exception of the military chaplains' reading group were willing to have their names used in the transcripts. A profile of the readers involved follows this discussion of procedure.

A number of factors and commitments were implicit in the process of enabling ordinary real-readers to read the Lukan Gospel, while other aspects of the process were made explicit to those participating in the reading groups. Some of these evolved over time as the process was trialed, and altered in minor respects.[122]

Some Presuppositions

As facilitator of the reading groups the following commitments should be identified as presuppositions the author brought to the task.

Biblical texts are to read by ordinary people.

The academic and ecclesial spaces of hermeneutic influence have made biblical interpretation a complicated art. As Sugirtharajah suggests the array of technical skills and mastery of ancient languages required in the approach of the professional readers leave the ordinary reader disempowered or overawed.[123] Rather than attempt any interpretation for themselves they look inevitably to

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122 This reading strategy particularly recognises and utilises the work of Gerald West, as discussed above, and also the insightful comments of Sugirtharajah, Voices. Cp. Ernesto Cardenal The Gospel in Solentiname.

123 Sugirtharajah, Voices, p. 435.

another culture and seek 'expert opinion'. For most ordinary people in church communities reading the biblical text either takes place in isolation from others through personal Bible study, usually with the aid of biblical notes written by 'experts', or in the context of a study or sermon where the meaning is extracted from the text by the clergy.

If biblical texts are made available to ordinary readers, who are given the opportunity to read the biblical stories and interpret them with freedom from the rules of church and academy and in the context of their own life experiences, the author's experience suggested that ordinary real-readers could and indeed should read and interpret the biblical text. Given the possibility to do so ordinary real-readers could become active agents in giving meaning to biblical texts for themselves, rather than simply appropriating meaning from the traditional sources of meaning in the church. Engaging ordinary readers from diverse social locations also means that the poor, the disempowered, the unemployed, the person suffering addictions, and those marginalised by gender issues could enter into the process of reading and interpreting the biblical story for today.[124]

Reading the text as we have it in its final form.

The final canonical form of the New Testament is both normative and accessible for ordinary real-readers. This does not ignore or deny that the final form of the text we have today is the product of authors, editors, scribal activity and modern textual reconstruction and translation. It does acknowledge that the final form of the text is the product of communal tradition through the process of canonisation. However the reading of the text takes place as ordinary people know it. It is accessible to them in English translations for example as The Good News Bible version of the New Testament, or as the combined Old and New Testaments in

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124 See discussion in John Reader, Local Theology: Church and Community in Dialogue (London: SPCK, 1994), especially pp. 1-25.

The New Revised Standard Version, the version most commonly used in the reading groups. The problems inherent in contemporary translations of first and second century texts are not of concern to the ordinary reader, although in a number of groups it emerged that there was considerable interest when different English versions were compared and there was variation. The process by which the text came into existence however was not the starting point in reading the text or in appropriating meaning.

For the process of reading by ordinary readers the most compelling reason for using the text in its final form is that this is the form most suitable and accessible for ordinary readers. The final form of the text was the primary object of the reading process, rather than the historical circumstances of its origin.[125]

Contemporary human experience (synchronic reading strategies) is the starting point in the process of reading and interpretation.

My interest in the reading groups was motivated by a desire to test to what extent contemporary human experience, including mine, and that of the ordinary real-readers participating in the process, was and is valid in appropriating the 'truth' and 'relevance' of biblical texts for today. This was sharply defined in contrast to the dominant theological context within which the author exists, which emphases the spiritual, supra-historical and metaphysical aspects of the text and church practice in the world, often with the use of historical-critical methods, at the expense of the physical, material aspects of the text and church practice. This implicit dualism inevitably places little concern on the 'physical' or material aspects of contemporary human experience, with an emphasis on matters spiritual and 'Godly'. I was interested in exploring how people from poor and disadvantaged social locations, and marginalised ecclesial locations might read the text from the

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125 Discussion of problems surrounding this issue can be found in John Riches, 'Text, Church and World: In Search of a Theological Hermeneutic', Biblical Interpretation 6.2, 1998, pp. 226 - 230; West, 'Difference and Dialogue', discusses the strengths of reading the text as we find it today for ordinary readers, pp. 155-157, note especially ftnt. 5. See also West, Biblical Hermeneutics, pp. 164 - 169.

point of their day to day physical needs and struggles, and what would emerge if the starting point in the reading process was their contemporary experience of disadvantage and marginalisation.

A 'synchronic' reading approach, as opposed to the diachronic reading approaches that have traditionally dominated interpretation, should allow ordinary readers to read the text in light of their experiences of life in their contemporary social locations. [126]

Read the text as narrative or story.

A definite strength identified by West in reading the biblical texts with ordinary readers in marginalised South African communities was that in reading the biblical texts as narratives, 'the Bible might not only be read as history but also as story'. [127] Commencing with the Gospel story as the ordinary readers had it was the most appropriate manner in which to read and understand the biblical text. As the majority of ordinary readers accepted, so too this process accepted, the Gospels as a collection of stories about Jesus Christ, within a total story. In order to assist in the process of reading, consideration was given to the basic elements of story telling, in particular, characters, plot and setting, and where relevant conflict, narrator and style. In order to make sure the readers read the story in the text, attention was given to this process in order to achieve a careful reading of the whole story, rather than just selective verses or aspects of the story. Particular stories within the whole story of the Gospel were read not in isolation, but as part of an integrated whole. Consequently a commitment to reading the whole gospel was encouraged.[128]

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126 See discussion in Watson, Church, Text and World, p.15.

127 West, 'Dialogue and Difference', p.156.

128 Following Norman Peterson, this approach will adopt a literary perspective that views the Gospel of Luke (along with the other Gospels) as a whole cloth of narrative fabric, not a patchwork of traditions put together without an awareness by the story teller. See N. Peterson, Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p.19.

Read the text in community.

As Watson makes clear the contemporary concept of 'text' as autonomous and self-contained is not without its own contradictions and difficulties. Reading the text as we have it in its final form and beginning with a synchronic framework, can take us no further unless we counterbalance these claims by asserting 'the fundamental hermeneutical significance of the reading community as the location from which the text derives its being and its rationale'.[129]

The dominant discourse (among others) of individualism in contemporary society has developed the myth that the biblical texts are designed to be read alone, or as personal individual daily Bible reading. A discussion of the superstitious aspect of this individualised ritual aside, it is clear, however, that the biblical texts were designed to be read publicly in the context of communal worship. Recovering this process of a communal reading of the text is an important aspect of this reading strategy.[130]

Reading the text in community will allow for different individuals to offer different interpretive views, but also allow the group within themselves to communally contribute different skills in the reading process. For 'ordinary' readers of the text it also allows people without reading skills to be included, as others can read the text to them and together interpretations can be offered. Reading the text in community will also reflect the nature of the particular communities of disadvantage and marginalisation within which the ordinary readers are embedded.

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129 Watson, Church, Text and World, pp. 40-45.

130 So S.E. Fowl & L.G. Jones, Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life (London: SPCK, 1991).

Identify the social location and dominant discourses that shape the world view of the reading groups.

Reading communities themselves exist within a particular context within the world. Consequently identifying the social location of the reading group and the discourse (or discourses) that shape their world view, is an essential aspect of this reading strategy.

This process identifies that the reading groups are not ideologically free or value-neutral. The reading groups will have particular presuppositions or questions they bring to the text, shaped and informed by their social location, life experience, self-understanding and their understanding of the world beyond their parochial context.

The reading groups were involved in the process of identifying the dominant discourses, conversations, symbols and metanarratives that influence and shape their world view, including the influence of dominant ideas in church and society. How this ecclesiological/theological environment effects the practice of faith and its relationship to the readers is a recurrent question in the process.

It also must be acknowledged that to a certain extent the reading groups in Woolloomooloo, Redfern and Surry Hills were partially constituted by their exposure to the preaching and teaching of the author, and the general ethos of Baptist Inner City Ministries, in the context of the local worshipping community in Woolloomooloo. The Glebe readers however had little or no contact with the author prior to the reading groups. Likewise the military chaplains. The extent to which this is evident in the transcripts is analysed in chapter four.

Identifying the Facilitator

Foregrounding the author's role in the reading groups and the author's own social location, commitments and an identification of the author's biases and interests,

remains an essential aspect of identifying how the reading groups were brought together, and possibly how readers in these groups perceived my role as facilitator.

As a white Anglo-Celtic male from the educated 'middle class' strata of Australian society the author does not occupy a marginalised position in contemporary urban society. The author's concern with reading the biblical text with those who are disadvantaged or marginalised, has arisen out of lengthy process of being partially constituted, to use Gerald West's term, by the human experience, the suffering and poverty of others. As a child of the sixties, major political and social upheavals lead to a distinct distrust of those who claimed the 'word of God' as a tool to make credible their particular ideological commitments. The nexus between ideology and 'faith' was unmasked through an analysis of dissent during the years of the Vietnam war.

A number of years employed in the overseas development industry (through a relief agency working directly with projects in the two-thirds world) cemented the author's concern with our current human condition. Over the past twelve years the author has lived and worked in the inner city of Sydney particularly with communities of poor people living in public housing. The role that the Bible and the church community has in responding to situations of disadvantage and marginalisation in liberating ways as well as the role that the Bible and the church community has in maintaining disadvantage and marginalisation are crucial concerns for the author.

I was fairly convinced that when ordinary readers from disadvantaged and marginalised life experiences were given the freedom to read the biblical texts in light of their experience, that readings could emerge that might lead to fresh interpretative insights and possibly expose readings that wittingly or unwittingly reflect the interests of the dominant classes in church and society, and wittingly or

unwittingly maintain oppression and power imbalances in our society, and in the church community itself.

As discussion of the process within each reading group will make clear I was always mindful of the inherent 'power' of my position in the groups, as both an educated male and an ordained clergy. This was foregrounded in a number of ways, with a recurrent emphasis on the freedom of the group to read the text as they felt appropriate.

The author's role required a conscious effort to allow the readers to respond to the text in their own way. The most recurrent intervention in the group reading process was to remind the reading groups to respond to the actual text or story, as opposed to what they *thought* might be there. My other recurrent intervention was to remind the group of the focus for the readings, which was contemporary human experience as opposed to either historical or spiritualised starting points. To assist in identifying how my facilitation and interventions into the reading process influenced, shaped or informed the readings and interpretations of the participants, in the analysis of the text in context in chapter four I have used the work of Kennard, Roberts and White.[131]

Kennard, Roberts and White collaborated on a research project aimed at studying group interventions and developed a 'coding system' to analyse group conductor interventions.[132] Utilising the work of S.H. Foulkes,[133] they provide a definition of group analysis as '*analysis of the group, by the group including the conductor*'.[134]

They propose that a group can be understood as comprising structure, process, and content, concluding 'a not unnatural expectation of a group conductor would be that his or her interventions would aim to: a) maintain the structure of the

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131 Kennard, Roberts & White.

132 Ibid., p.7.

133 The development of group-analytic psychotherapy is discussed and analysed in J. Roberts & M. Pines (Eds.) The Practice of Group Analysis (London: Routledge, 1991).

134 Kennard, Roberts & White, p.111. [italics theirs].

group, b) facilitate the process and c) clarify the latent content of the statements and interactions of the group. It is possible to classify many if not all conductor interventions using this framework.'[135]

Kennard, Roberts and White provide a useful 'system of coding' group conductor interventions as follows:

> 1. *Maintenance* interventions are those aimed at clarifying or re-affirming a relevant boundary. This may be a boundary of place, time, membership, task or permitted behaviour and may concern the boundaries of the group as a whole or of a particular member including the conductor.
> 2. *Open facilitation* is an intervention aimed at promoting the forward movement of the group process, but not based on any particular interpretative hypothesis on the part of the conductor and not referring to unconscious levels of awareness.
> 3. *Guided facilitation* includes all facilitating remarks that are not simply open-ended, but which indicate that the conductor has a hypothesis in mind, which is guiding his questioning, prompting and observations.
> 4. *Interpretation* involves verbal intervention by the conductor which makes manifest feelings or meanings which are latent in what the group as a whole or its individual members are saying.
> 5. *No immediate response* is a coding which acknowledges that during the course of an ongoing group, a significant part of the behaviour of the conductor will involve silent observation of his group . . .
> 6. *Action* refers to any kind of physical activity which the group conductor might engage in inside the group, which involves leaving his/her chair or touching another group member.
> 7. *Self-disclosure* is any declaration by the [facilitator] about the content of his own inner world, or his outer world, which does not fit in any category of intervention.
> 8. *Modelling* is any activity on the part of the conductor which contains an implicit intention that it should be identified with and become a part of the repertoire of behaviour of the group . . .[136]

There are similarities and differences between the groups described by Kennard, Roberts and White and the reading groups conducted as part of this project. The most obvious is the focus of Kennard, Roberts and White on group analytical psychotherapy. However some similarities between groups are evident. In the reading groups the group structure was a 'process', a process that included the group *and* the conductor in analysis - a reading of a text - a reading 'with' by the conductor, as well as a reading of 'by' the group. Secondly the groups were

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135 Ibid., p.8.
136 Ibid.

voluntary meetings of people with a common culture rooted in 'a shared language and society (in my case a common social location).[137] Thirdly the reading groups were invited and participated through choice.

Acknowledging these differences and similarities, the coding system devised by Kennard, Roberts and White does however provide a useful tool for the analysis of interventions in the process of the groups reading the Gospel of Luke. The four intervention types most useful in analysing these interventions are: *maintenance* interventions; *open facilitation* interventions; *guided facilitation* interventions; and *interpretations*. Where relevant those interventions identified as 'no immediate response', 'action', 'self-disclosure' and 'modelling' will also be identified as defined above.

It should be noted that Kennard, Roberts and White conclude ' . . . there is no "correct" intervention in a particular situation, but rather, within fairly broad limits, a range of possibilities, some of which may feel more comfortable to you, and more consistent with your personal style than others.' They also conclude there is no need for an intervention to be assumed to be 'value-neutral'. [138]

The Process

Group Processes

Invitation to readers to participate in a group was either a verbal invitation, or a written invitation, depending upon the level of literacy of the readers and the group. The only group where the process had to be negotiated due to a sense of suspicion was the military chaplains' group. The most recurrent form of invitation and explanation that preceded each group was as follows:

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137 In chapter 12 the author, M. Pines, identifies the following attribute of groups successfully combined in the process of therapy : 'Through the sharing of a common culture rooted in a shared language and society, the majority of the patients in one therapeutic group will be connected at their deepest levels by these common roots', Ibid., p.98.

138 Ibid., p.115.

In this reading workshop we will approach the reading of the Gospel of Luke in a particular way. We will read the text as story, and to help us with a 'close reading' of the text we will look at characters, plot and setting.

The second aspect of this reading approach is that we will read the text for our lives today. Our primary concern will be to read the text in our contemporary setting asking what does the text mean for me today.

We will also read the text after we have discussed and agreed on what major aspects of our lives form for us the questions we bring to the text. So at the beginning we will do some analysis of our context. What are the major concerns we have and what shapes the way we see the world. So we will begin with an analysis of reality as perceived by each member of the group.

I need also to identify my role. I am here to facilitate the reading process (which may mean from time to time I may ask questions or redirect our attention back to the text). What you have to say when you read the text is crucial in the process of interpreting the text for today. You should not feel there is a right or wrong answer or that you should give the kind of answer expected in a 'church' setting. For the purpose of this process you should not feel there is only one right answer.

Following this basic introduction the group was encouraged to explore and identify the major contextual questions that the readers brought to the text. Those who could were always encouraged to read the whole of the Gospel of Luke as soon as they could. Each story or part of the Lukan text the group was considering was always read audibly. Following the audible reading of the text, three questions were discussed in order to facilitate a clear understanding of the story or text. They were: *who are the major characters*?; *what is the setting*?; *what is the plot*? Following this discussion a fourth question sought to establish in a consistent fashion the interpretive starting point for the reading of the story: *what does it mean to you today*?. This process was utilised in all the groups on a consistent basis, to which were added interventions and the reader's responses.

This amount of information was common to all groups. This introductory information was received differently by each group. For the groups made up of ordinary readers in Glebe, Woolloomooloo and Redfern and Surry Hills, these introductory remarks produced little discussion or questioning. The military

chaplains group spent considerably more time in the first session discussing and accepting the process.

The introductory material clearly foregrounded the intention of the reading group in terms of focus. In simple terms this was explained to the groups as a desire to hear from the readers what the text meant to them 'today', rather than what the text might have meant to the original audience. As the transcripts indicate not all readings of the texts could proceed without reference to some historical material, a matter taken up in the analysis of the readings.

It was further identified that the groups had to feel comfortable enough to accept there was no 'right' or 'wrong' answer to the question of what the text meant for them in their contemporary reality. There was no expected answer. Questions involving the use of 'Why?' were intentionally sparingly applied to a person's reading of the text. There was not an expectation that there *should* be a reason or justification given for a person's reading of a particular text. When 'Why?' was part of an intervention, it was used with regard to the text rather than a reader's response to the text. For example: *Why would Jesus tell us this story and what does it mean?*[139] and *Why does Jesus tell this parable?*[140]

Essential to the process was an identification of the author's role as facilitator, and the level of trust and openness between the author as facilitator and the group. This required that the groups meet in as 'natural' a setting as possible for the reading process and in a way that would mostly reflect a group they were comfortable with. Consequently it was expected that the author's wife would be present in her own right as the Pastor of the local church in Woolloomooloo, especially in the women's groups. It would have been regarded as quite 'unnatural' for her to be excluded by members of the local community engaged in this reading process. The extent to which her presence affected group dynamics is

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139 Volume Two, p. 61.
140 Ibid., p. 166.

identifiable from the transcripts. This also led to cross-membership between groups. This is most apparent with the second and third women's groups in Woolloomooloo, where the reading built on previous readings and concerns.

Given the attempt by the author to facilitate an open reading of the Lukan text, and in light of the approach of reading 'with', it is apparent from the transcripts that in some of the groups there was a tendency to atomise rather than to engage with each other in the process or to respond to the author as facilitator. To what extent this is totally avoidable is unclear.

Qualitative research as empirical reader-research.

The research method did not have any quantitative aims. Rather in terms of analysing the attitudes, opinions, values and beliefs of the readers, in terms of 'social research', the method was essentially 'qualitative', as identified by Mackay:

> Qualitative research sets out to investigate attitudes, values and beliefs without the use of structured survey techniques which are designed to use numbers. Qualitative research is deliberately designed to bypass the rational; to avoid the use of direct questions, especially those involving 'Why?'; to minimise any pressure on . . . respondents to give answers which fit a particular survey instrument.[141]

As Mackay indicates such a research method requires 'a group of people who already know each other'[142] to meet in a familiar context.[143] The process is unstructured.

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141 Hugh Mackay, 'The Research Method' in Reinventing Australia (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993), pp. 303 -304.

142 Ibid., p. 304.

143 Cp. West, Biblical Hermeneutics, pp. 175 -177. West identifies his approach as 'empirical' reader research, and identifies a central concern in the process adopted in South Africa to be 'to have a record of *ordinary people* reading the Bible *in an authentic and familiar context*'. [italics his]. See also Sinclair who summarises his approach as follows: 'This involved the use of work with groups rather than interviews with individuals, and it involved the use of texts (both biblical and other) which sought a response. This therefore takes us into the kind of area to which Bulmer was referring when he talked of both work with groups and of conversational techniques in which the qualitative is more important than the quantitative . . .Thus the research set out to examine the way in which church members (meeting as church members and not isolated individuals) read the Bible and what effect their social background had on this. It set out to do this by way of a mixture of vignette and

> Some people will talk a great deal; some will say very little. The discussion will proceed as any natural, normal group proceeds. There will be leaders and followers; those who dominate and those who are submissive; agreements and disagreements; side-tracking and wise-cracking. In the ebb and flow of natural conversation, the attitudes, values and beliefs of the group will gradually emerge. It is the dynamics of non-directive group interaction which yield the information we are seeking. [144]

The Reading Groups

The reading groups are identified as follows. Glebe Reading Group: two groups met over a period of two years and read the whole of Luke. Surry Hills Reading Group: met over a period of three months and read the parables in Luke. Redfern Reading Group: met over an eight week period and read chapter 4 to 8 in Luke. Woolloomooloo Women's Group: met on three separate occasions over a two year period and read along thematic lines in Luke including the birth narratives in Luke, women in Luke and men in Luke. Military Chaplains' Reading Group: a six week reading group in chapters 4 to 8 in Luke.

Profile of readers

With the exception of the military chaplains' reading group the readers in the groups were either women (a marginalised group in both ecclesial and social locations); Indigenous people; public housing tenants; migrants and others engaged in mission and ministry in the context in which the readings took place. At least two women had received some theological training, but were included in the women's groups because of their marginalisation within their faith tradition, (which at the time of the reading groups did not accept or officially recognise women in ministry). Twenty-eight regular readers were engaged in the process. Around fifty percent of the readers came from a non-church background and had

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conversation techniques but in a group setting.' Sinclair cites the work of Martin Bulmer and Janet Finch to support his approach summarised above in chapter one. See pp. 49-50.

144 Mackay, Reinventing Australia, pp. 304 -305; See also discussion in Mackay, Generations, (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1997), especially pp. 201 - 209.

only as adults been part of a local church community. Forty percent of the readers would generally be regarded as from a non-book culture. A minority of readers were illiterate and reliant on the text being read audibly. A profile of individual readers who participated in the reading groups on a regular basis follows. This profile attempts to identify their social and ecclesial location, including other aspects relevant to the reading process:

Bruce McKenzie: Glebe Group One and Two. Public housing resident of Glebe, receiving a sickness benefit.

Ray Brown: Glebe Group One. Public housing resident of Glebe, suffering schizophrenia, receiving a sickness benefit.

Oenwen Woods (Gwen): Glebe Group One and Two. Public housing resident of Glebe, unemployed, sole parent.

Leigh Webster (Shirley): Glebe Group One and Two. Public housing resident of Glebe, unemployed.

Colin Brown: Glebe Group Two. Public housing resident of Glebe, unemployed.

Izzy MacLay: Public housing resident of Glebe, suffering manic-depression, receiving a sickness pension.

Rex Fleming: Redfern and Surry Hills Reading Groups. Private rental resident of Annandale, unemployed, tertiary educated.

Steve Jago: Redfern and Surry Hills Reading Groups. Private home-owner and retired business-man.

Mary Jago: Redfern, Surry Hills and Women's Reading Groups. Private home-owner and staff worker at Baptist Inner City Ministries.

Rowena Curtis: Redfern, Surry Hills and Women's Reading Groups: Church Housing provided. Pastor Woolloomooloo Baptist Fellowship (ordination not available - role as sole pastor of the church not accredited), tertiary educated.

David McNamara: Redfern Reading Group. Private rental resident of Woolloomooloo and Occupational Therapist.

Ruth Das: Redfern Reading Group. Private rental resident of Redfern and Community Nurse.

Jenny Keeler-Milne: Redfern Reading Group. Private rental resident of Glebe and unemployed.

Craig Keeler-Milne: Redfern Reading Group. Private rental resident of Glebe and Director of family hardware firm, tertiary educated.

Sue Jennings: Surry Hills and Women's Group Three Reading Groups. Subsidised private rental and Residential Care Worker in a Long Term Accommodation Unit, Baptist Inner City Ministries, completed four years at Baptist Theological College (ordination not available).

Bronwyn McNamara: Women's Group One. Private rental resident of Woolloomooloo, and Community Nurse.

Tracey Jones: Women's Group One and Three. Private rental resident of Glebe. Coordinator Women's Space for Sex-workers Project, Baptist Inner City Ministries.

Joy Connor: Women's Group One. Private home-owner and Community Development Coordinator, Baptist Inner City Ministries.

Lee Parker: Women's Group One. Private rental resident of Woolloomooloo, and secretary.

Michele Besant: Women's Group Two. Public housing resident of Woolloomooloo, unemployed.

Margaret Martinez: Women's Group Two and Three. Public housing resident and Aboriginal resident of Woolloomooloo, sole parent and unemployed.

Fieleda Ivan: Women's Group Two. Public housing resident of Surry Hills, sole parent, migrant from China and unemployed.

Taksan Scott: Women's Group Two. Private rental resident of Eastwood and music teacher.

Sondra Kalnins: Women's Group Three. Public housing resident of Woolloomooloo, sole parent, migrant from Latvia, and Outreach Worker Women's Space project.

The military chaplains requested they be identified by Christian name and rank as identified in Volume Two.

Conclusion

We have identified the process utilised in the reading groups conducted as part of this research with ordinary real-readers in a particular inner city location in Sydney. Discussion and analysis of this location is a crucial aspect of this study, in view of the suggestion that all readings are shaped and informed by the particular as well as the wider context, in which readers are located. Before we proceed to this discussion however, it is important to identify what theoretical basis the process outlined above might have in contemporary hermeneutics and postmodern theorising.

Reader-Response Theories and Real-Readers.

Inquiry into the process of interpretation is 'intrinsic to Christian faith' because of the nature of that faith's origins, and subsequent understanding of the originating event in the person of Jesus Christ, through the biblical texts that came to comprise the New Testament.[145]

The essential nature of this inquiry is identified by Anthony Thiselton: 'How we read, understand, interpret, and use biblical texts relates to the very identity of Christian faith and stands at the heart of Christian theology.'[146]

If this inquiry is at the heart of Christian life, how should we understand the term 'interpretation'? Ben Myer provides a useful suggestion: 'Interpretation is a methodically mounted effort to read a text that does not yield its sense

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145 So John Goldingay: '"The hermeneutic problem" is intrinsic to Christian faith because of the nature of that faith's origins. Jesus Christ first came to be understood by means of interpretation of the existent Jewish scriptures, and this process involved interpretation of these scriptures in light of him . . . Jesus' significance is itself interpreted in the church's proclamation, and the church is invited to live hermeneutically by deciphering its own experience in light of the story of Jesus. The church's proclamation of Jesus is interpreted in the writings that came to make up the Second Testament. His significance for us is then ascertained only through an interpretation of these scriptures that enables the written word to become again the living word', in Models for Interpretation of Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster press, 1995), pp. 2 - 3.

146 Thiselton, New Horizons, p. 2.

immediately,'[147] or, more simply, 'the act of working out an understanding of the text'.[148] The act of interpretation may then be understood to be the process of doing whatever is necessary to make the biblical text understandable, including the use of critical methods.

Entry into any discussion of biblical hermeneutics remains treacherous in view of the multitudinous variety of concepts and terms used in this field. Biblical interpretation has been somewhat divided since the time of Krister Stendahl's article on 'Biblical Theology',[149] between 'the distanced, neutral identification of the original meaning of the text' - *what a text meant* in its original context, and 'a *subsequent* or at least quite distinct task of perceiving its present meaning for the church', - *what it means now*. Discussion concerning the *subsequent* nature of the theological task and its relationship to historical-critical biblical inquiry, remains a lively debate in Euro-American scholarship.[150]

Procedural questions aside (although we will return to this issue in chapter five), the interpretive principle formulated by Friedrich Ast and Friedrich Schleiermacher, of the 'hermeneutic circle' has for some time been one attempt at dealing with the *then* of the text and the *now* of the interpreter.[151] Building on the original understanding of Ast and Schleiermacher, that we understand the whole of the text only in light of its parts, but also the parts only in light of the whole, a dialogical

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147 Ben F. Myer, Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), p. 90.

148 Ibid., p. 211. Myer suggests interpretation also involves 'judging how accurate this understanding is, and stating what one judges to be an accurate understanding of the text'.

149 Stendahl, 'Biblical Theology', pp. 418 - 432. As Brett indicates, Stendahl's concerns, reflecting those of the so called 'Biblical Theology Movement', prioritised historical criticism as the most 'appropriate method of biblical study'. See Brett, Biblical Criticism in Crisis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.1; cp. Francis Watson, Church, Text and World.

150 See John Riches, 'Text, Church and World: In Search of a Theological Hermeneutic' and Francis Watson, 'A Response to John Riches' Biblical Interpretation 6.2, 1998, pp. 235-242. Werner G. Jeanrond's article in the same volume of Biblical Interpretation makes the suggestion ' . . . it would seem to me that both biblical scholars and theologians ought to co-operate in the ambitious project of discussing the theological challenge of the biblical texts and their polyphonic revelatory witness', in 'The Significance of Revelation for Biblical Theology', p. 256.

151 Thiselton, New Horizons, pp. 204-236.

process between interpreter and text is now understood to be initiated by the reader:

> The 'circle' of the hermeneutical process begins when the interpreter takes his [or her] own preliminary questions to the text. But because [these] questions may not be the best or most appropriate ones, his [or her] understanding of the subject-matter of the text may at first remain limited, provisional, and even liable to distortion. Nevertheless the text, in turn, speaks back to the hearer: it begins to interpret [the interpreter]; it sheds light on [the interpreter's] own situation and . . . questions. His [or her] initial questions now undergo revision in light of the text itself, and in response to more adequate questioning, the text itself now speaks more clearly and intelligibly. The process continues, whilst the interpreter achieves a progressively deeper understanding of the text.[152]

In summary, understanding is the result of a progressive, dialogical process that brings together, or fuses, the 'two horizons' of text and interpreter.[153]

Keeping in mind the widespread currency of hermeneutic concepts and the distinction between what a text meant and what it means, the hermeneutic circle and the two horizons, there is another helpful entry point into biblical hermeneutics, particularly relevant to the research surrounding this project.

It is increasingly accepted that interpretive methods can be categorised according to whether they locate meaning *behind*, *within*, or *in front* of the text.[154] *Behind the*

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152 Thiselton, 'The New Hermeneutic,' in I. Howard Marshall, (Ed.), New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979 ed.), p. 316.

153 The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer marked a crucial transition in the understanding of the reader/interpreter's role. Gadamer identified two 'horizons': the horizon of meaning which can be disclosed by the text and the horizon of the interpreter. For Gadamer these two horizons fuse in valid interpretation. See Thiselton, The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). So David Tracey argues: 'We do not seek simply to repeat, to reproduce the original meaning of the text in order to understand its (and now our) questions. Rather, creativity must be involved as we seek to mediate, translate, interpret its meaning... into our own horizon.' 'Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm', in H. Kung & D. Tracey, Paradigm Change in Theology, (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p.42. Mark Brett reveals a direct link between the work of Gadamer and the development of reader-response approaches, particularly for H.R. Jauss in 'The Future of Reader Criticisms?', in F. Watson, The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies, (London: SCM, 1993).

154 See West, Contextual Bible Study, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993) pp. 27 - 50, expanded in West, Biblical Hermeneutics, pp. 131-164; also J. B. Green, 'The Challenge of Hearing the New Testament,' in J. B. Green, (Ed.), Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation,(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

text approaches fit within what Thiselton has described as 'the historical model of critical inquiry that has characterised "modernity" in New Testament interpretation'.[155] The major concern is the reconstruction of the historical period in which the text was produced and the type of society that produced the text. *In* or *within the text* approaches seek meaning within the structure of the text itself, and are primarily interested in the literary world of the text. For such methods, '. . . the validity of varying readings of a text is adjudicated not with reference to a reconstructed history behind the text but with reference to the evidence produced in the text itself'.[156] Here the concern is to concentrate on the internal relationships within the text, and the relationships between the different parts of the story and between different characters. *In front of the text* approaches focus not on the historical context of the text or the 'world' of the text itself, but rather on the current contexts of readers. Such reader-oriented methods of interpretation emphasize that one's historical, social, and cultural setting profoundly influences the way in which one reads and interprets texts. This 'relative autonomy of the text' allows for an active reader in the process of interpretation. The focus for the reading is not on what the text meant in the past, but what it means for the present and the future.

This movement within biblical hermeneutics and the recognition that context has a profound impact on how we understand ourselves and the world in which we live, including the biblical texts we read, and the recognition of readers as an active agent in the process of the interpretation of texts, requires some consideration of postmodern theorising.[157]

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155 Thiselton, 'New Testament Interpretation in Historical Perspective,' in Green, Hearing the New Testament, p.18. *Behind the text* approaches include historical criticism proper, source criticism, tradition-historical criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and social-scientific criticism.

156 Green, 'The Challenge of Hearing the New Testament', pp. 7-8. Within the text approaches include composition criticism, narrative criticism, structuralism, and some forms of both canonical and rhetorical criticism.

157 Postmodernism, a rather fluid term, first used in the 1930s, is generally used to identify the body of theoretical thought that developed during the late 1960's, including poststructuralist and deconstructionist approaches in both literary and artistic interpretation (and also interpretation of style and architecture). It became common use during the 1980s, extending its use to embrace the French post-structuralist debates and for example the work of Michele Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Françios Lyotard and some North American pragmatist philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish. For literary studies (and

'Postmodernism represents a rejection of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built.'[158] The key features of modernity - rationalism, which elevated reason to the status of ultimate court of appeal; the autonomy of self, which led to radical individualism and moral self-sufficiency; belief in inevitable technical and social progress and the assumption of the possibility of objective knowledge of the external world, have come under severe scrutiny and in many areas of thought, not just textual interpretation, have been progressively rejected.[159] Consequently in postmodern theorising reason is no longer the supreme judge because it has been discovered that far from being objective and neutral, 'reason is not impartial and timeless, but loaded, partisan and time-conditioned'.[160] Self-autonomy is questioned as an unqualified value with the rise of community movements throughout the western world, (a phenomenon of the 1960s and 1970s), while belief in progress has disintegrated with the recognition that mastering nature for human ends has had potentially catastrophic consequences. Whereas modernists were preoccupied with knowledge of the external world and justification of such knowledge as true or accurate, postmodern theorising rejects that such knowledge is demonstrable and have replaced concern for knowledge with interpretation. Reality is whatever it is interpreted to be. An objective world independent of our interpretation, and so objective truth,

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art) meaning of an object under scrutiny became anchored in the receptor, rather than as self evident from the authorial intention or the context- of- situation of the text (or work under scrutiny). The challenges that postmodernism presents for New Testament studies and hermeneutics is discussed in many publications. See Thiselton Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995); also S. J. Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) and McKnight, Post-Modern Use of the Bible. Also Diogenes Allen, Christian Belief in A Postmodern World (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 1989).

158 Grenz, A Primer, p.5.

159 For discussion of the impact of postmodern thought on a range of different disciplines as well as aspects of Christian theology see Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel & Chris Sugden, (Eds.), Faith and Modernity (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1994).

160 Elizabeth Templeton, 'How to live with Pilate's joke', St Mark's Review 169,1997, p.3.

discounted as our 'social construction of reality',[161] precludes some external reference point to validate truth claims.[162] Modernist theorising assumed it was capable of utilising reason and claiming objective knowledge to move beyond culture-specific myths to a 'narrative' that would 'out-narrate' all other 'narratives', to explain the world and humankind's place within it. Such a totalising narrative, or 'metanarative' has been recognised as defunct, as Jean-François Lyotard suggests: 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives'.[163]

As Grenz points out, this poses particular problems for Christianity precisely because it constitutes a metanarrative that makes universal claims.[164] Obviously this ferment in thought has led in some circles to outright rejection of postmodern theorising and a retreat into fundamentalism. An alternative approach however is not one of retreat, but of analysis, and the identification of possibilities which postmodern theorising opens up for biblical interpretation.

The acceptance of local narratives and their value, the identification of the socially constructed nature of our 'world(s)' and the two most prominent interpretive methods identified with postmodernism - deconstruction and reader-response criticism (although the latter will prove central to this paper rather than the former), offer some possibilities for new readings of ancient texts to emerge.

Of the various affects of postmodern theorising crucial to ongoing reading strategies is the established suggestion that, 'our postmodern condition is irreducibly *plural* and irreducibly *particular*. Every particular social or communal location is the site of a variety of small-scale narratives, and it is these - rather

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161 So Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

162 Templeton states: 'There is no cosmic, holistic vantage point . . . All vision is fragmented, and much so-called vision is projection.', 'How to live with Pilate's joke', p. 3.

163 Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Trans G. Bennington & B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, xxiii-1v; quoted in Grenz, A Primer, p.46.

164 Grenz, A Primer, p. 164.

than the old and defunct metanarratives [or ideologies] - which enable us to make pragmatic if not theoretical sense of our world.'[165]

Particularity confirms that readings of texts are contextual, readings influenced by a multitude of localised as well as global discourses. Particularity confirms what sociology of knowledge approaches (and discourse analysis[166]) recognise: that a readers' convictions are shaped by the plot of their own life experiences, popular culture, ethnicity, and from the grand metanarratives or ideologies (for example, market capitalism), to the smallest most private memory they have.

Consequently contemporary reading strategies must concern themselves, if they wish to be relevant to the contemporary world, as much with the influence of twentieth century discourses on the process of reading and interpretation of the biblical text today, as with the history, context and influence of first century discourses on the composition of the text.

It follows an 'understanding of the *effect* of a text in a particular context and the way in which that context conditions interpretation: what is it that causes a particular effect and what is it about the situation that conditions its reception?' [167] is an essential question for contemporary hermeneutics.

Pluralism, the other irreducible reality identified by Watson, undergirds the recognition that 'readings' or 'interpretations' of texts will vary from context to context. Contemporary reading strategies need to recognise pluralism ends

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165 Watson, Church, Text and World, p. 81. (italics mine).

166 The nature and power of discourse is identified by Michel Foucault in The Archaeology of Knowledge (New York: Harper, 1972); that is a discourse actively forms and constructs people's perceptions of reality [and consequent behaviour]. Social meanings are produced within social institutions, and the language of each group which shares what it sees as common meanings is a discourse. To put it another way, a discourse is a perspective, a conceptual framework, a way of looking at things, and it has presumed shared meanings amongst those operating within and from the discourse. Foucault theorises that a discourse is an active, forming, constructing practice. So Foucault proposes that a discourse actively forms and constructs people's perceptions of reality, and conscious or subconscious constructions that lead to practice or behaviour. People construct their reality, and have their reality constructed for them, out of the discourses within which they are operating.

167 Rowland, 'Dialogue', p. 56.

totalitarian claims (in all disciplines, although the focus for this study is that of theology) by any sector of the ecclesiastical community, to control 'truth' or make final statements assuming the 'Word of God' is 'their word'.

Critical theory and the work of Ricoeur, Habermas and the Frankfurt School suggest it is inappropriate for biblical interpretation to study the *Sitz im leben* of the writer, without at the same time examining the social and historical location of the reader.[168] Habermas' interpretive theory developed the concept of 'ideological suspicion', or a 'hermeneutic of suspicion',[169] in order to consider the connections between 'knowledge' and the human interests of the interpreter.[170] 'Suspicion' applies to historical reconstruction, every 'reading' or 'interpretation', including the transmission of the text itself. So feminist hermeneutics has shown the androcentric bias of historical reconstruction, including its influence on the text itself,[171] while the theologians of liberation have exposed the ideological bias of the powerful and rich in the western church and academies, who for centuries have reconstructed history and controlled biblical interpretation, wittingly or unwittingly, to serve their own interests and ideological commitments.[172] Itumeleng Mosala, summarises the inevitable conclusion for biblical interpretation: '. . . biblical appropriations and interpretations are always framed by the social and

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168 See P. Ricour, Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press); J Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (London: Heinemann, 1972); R. Geuss, The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1981).

169 Habermas' theory has been termed a hermeneutics of suspicion because of his focus on '...critical unmasking of the ideological power-components contained in the language of tradition as well as in contemporary formulations... critical hermeneutics suspiciously examines the potential power-oriented profit that one may gain from deliberately having recourse to tradition's authority.' See discussion in G. De Schrijver, 'Hermeneutics and Tradition', in P.F. Fransen, Authority in the Church (Leuven: LUP, 1983). The ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly that language is so misleading that it is a primary source of illusion; and that truth-claims not only veil the will to power, but are themselves the means of exerting power and domination over others; and 'all that exists consists of interrelations', are particularly influential in the rise of a hermeneutic of suspicion; see Thiselton, Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self, pp. 5 - 7.

170 So the work of Juan Luis Segundo, whereby the process of the 'hermeneutic circle', that is the conversation between text and reader, is punctuated by 'suspicion', leading initially to a critical awareness of the dominant ideologies and social structures that shape the world in which we live, which in turn leads to suspicion about the prevailing modes of Biblical exegesis, raising new questions which we bring to the text. See J.L. Segundo, 'The Hermeneutic Circle', in Third World Liberation Theologies (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), pp. 64ff.

171 So for example Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, (London: SCM, 1983)

172 So for example Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation (London: SCM, 1974)

cultural location and commitments of those who do them.'[173] This also applies to the author of any text.[174] It is with a focus on the reader as interpreter to which we now turn.

As noted before, in reaction to formalist methods of interpretation that sought the meaning of a text *within* the text itself - rather than *behind* the text in the intention of the author or the historical situation in which the text was written - reader-response critics emphasise the space *in front of* the text by focussing on the *reception* of a text *by a reader.*[175]

Robert Fowler observes:

> The reader-response critic argues that whatever meaning is and wherever it is found the reader is ultimately responsible for determining meaning. In reader-response criticism, meaning is no longer considered a given. It is not something ready-made, buried in the text, and just waiting to be uncovered. Rather, it is something produced in the act of reading through the unique interaction of the text and the particular reader doing the reading, at a particular moment, from a particular slant.[176]

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173 I. Mosala, Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p.6; also Segundo 'Hermeneutic Circle', pp. 80ff.; cp. Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), pp. 1- 38, where Myers attempts to foreground his own 'reading site' in order to identify his social location and ideological commitments before turning to the interpretation of the text.

174 See for example Zygmunt Baumann, Hermeneutics and Social Science: Approaches to Understanding (London: Hutchinson, 1978) or the work of any member of 'The Context Group', for example P. Esler, Community and Gospel and Jerome Neyrey, (Ed.), The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) utilising sociology of knowledge approaches to locate the author within the author's context and the variety of social, political, cultural and economic factors that affect the writing of the biblical texts.

175 So Terence Keegan: 'Reader-response critics maintain the reader cannot be left out of consideration in analysing the meaning or significance of a text.', 'Biblical Criticism and the Challenge of Postmodernism,' Biblical Interpretation 3, 1 (1995), p. 4. Thiselton traces the movement in literary theory from formalism, the New Criticism and the emphasis in early structuralism on textual system, through to post-structuralism, reader theories and post-modernist approaches in chapters XIII and XIV of his New Horizons. See also West, Biblical Hermeneutics, pp. 21 - 46; also McKnight, Post-Modern Use of the Bible, especially pp. 27-58.

176 Robert M. Fowler, 'Reader-Response Criticism: Figuring Mark's Reader', in J. C. Anderson & Steven D. Moore, (Eds.), Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), pp. 51 - 52; cp. Steven Moore's definition of reader-response criticism: 'Not a unified theory or method but a spectrum of contrasting positions, some focussed on the roles of reading implied or encoded in literary texts . . ., others more concerned with how actual readers read, and others centred on the factors (institutional, sociocultural, linguistic) that enable and delimit reading in the first place.', in Literary Criticism and the Gospels, p.183; cp. also Thiselton, New Horizons, who proposes: 'reader-

Essentially reader-response approaches, free from the focus of finding meaning buried within the text, are able to focus on the temporal experience of reading itself. This focus on the reader has not led to a focus on a particular reader, but on a plethora of readers.

For example, as Thiselton notes, Wolfgang Iser, amongst others, distinguishes between 'reader-response theory' and 'reception theory', the former with its 'roots in the text', the latter arising from a history of reader's judgements. In the latter the reader is 'real' and conditioned by their own culture, while in the former the reader is 'ideal'. This ideal reader is a construction of the historian or a 'hypothetical' reader, as in Iser's terms the ideal reader would need to have 'an identical code to that of the author . . . The ideal reader would also have to share the intentions underlying this process'.[177] While Iser is concerned with individual readers, other scholars utilising reader-response approaches are more concerned with reading communities out of which interpretation is constructed, and by which interpretation is constructed.[178] As Thiselton points out the 'implied reader' of Iser and the 'interpretive community' of Fish are but two amongst a range of readers in reading theories.[179]

Thiselton identifies the positive contribution reader theories can make to the hermeneutic process, when readers are identified as having an *active, creative* and *participatory* role in reading the biblical text. This positive contribution is qualified by Thiselton, for whom the most significant difficulty is that reader-

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response theories call attention to the active role of communities of readers in constructing what counts for them as "what the text means"', p. 515.

177 Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore/London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978 and 1980), p. ix, quoted in Thiselton, New Horizons, p. 517.

178 See for example Stanley Fish Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980) or Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); cp. Richard Rorty Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) or Consequences of Pragmatism, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

179 Thisleton identifies also the 'model reader', the 'super-reader', the 'ideal reader' as well as the 'implied' reader and the 'reading community'. One question that appears possible in light of all these readers is where is the 'real' reader?

response theories 'invite the possible collapse of critical or socio-critical interpretation into *social-pragmatic* reading which serves only to affirm *prior community norms*.'[180] When 'meaning' is subsumed within the prior horizons of the reading community, Thiselton argues, '*we no longer stand where, with Gadamer, we construe engagements between readers and texts as interaction between two horizons, each of which is first to be respected before a fusion of these two horizons can take place*.'[181] Thiselton is particularly concerned with the philosophical position of both Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish whose reader theories appear to reduce meaning to something context-relative and confined.[182]

While it is prudent to note Thiselton's concerns, Brett argues that Fish is somewhat misunderstood by those who 'demonise' his work. Analysing Edgar Conrad's work Reading Isaiah, Brett notes in methodological summary that all previous theories about authors and editors had to be suspended, for what was methodologically primary was the 'interaction between text and reader'.[183] Brett's concern is however that Conrad quoting from Fish concludes that 'all talk of authorial intention as an interpretive goal must be given up as illusory'.[184] But suggests Brett, interpretive goals are not the focus of Fish's comments, rather the focus is epistemology: 'The main point is that authorial intention is always the product of critical reconstruction. We cannot know an author's mind directly; it is not a bit of evidence independent of the process of interpretation'.[185]

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180 Thiselton, New Horizons, p. 515. (italics Thiselton's).

181 Ibid., pp. 515-516. (italics Thiselton's).

182 Thiselton identifies five 'disastrous elements' for hermeneutics:
'(i) If textual meaning, is the *product* of a community of readers . . . texts cannot reform those readers from outside . . . (ii)*Prophetic address* as that which comes "from beyond" virtually against human will is either illusory or to be explained in terms of pre-conscious inner conflict . . . It is not in the end an address: the community itself has created the word. (iii) Such notions as *grace* or *revelation must* (by pragmatic doctrine) be illusory, because Rorty tells us there are no "givens". (iv) *The message of the cross* remains a *linguistic construct* of a tradition . . . (v) . . . Social pragmatism accepts only social winners as criteria of truth', in New Horizons, pp. 549 - 550.

183 Brett, 'The Future of Reader Criticisms?', p.15.

184 Ibid.

185 Ibid.

The point is, according to Fish, that *all* scholarship is the product of interpretive communities, all interpretation is socially constructed: 'We are dealing here with general philosophical reflections on the nature of reading, no matter what method we adopt, no matter what school of criticism.'[186] Fish is asserting an 'epistemological necessity', 'he has no methodological prescriptions or recommendations at all'.[187] Fish is stating all interpretation is implicitly reader interpretation or reading from different reading communities. Brett argues this does not mean that one cannot adopt his philosophy of interpretation and at the same time be interested in authorial intention.[188]

For Brett the usefulness of reader theories relates to pluralism. There are many questions one can bring to the text, so a variety of approaches are necessary in order to proceed to find a variety of answers. One does not extinguish the other. Focus on authorial intention may be the way one answers the historical question, while reader-response may be the way one answers the question of contemporary meaning of texts.[189] The major contribution of reader theories to the process of interpretation is the way in which those using these approaches have identified how readings are shaped by ideological and ethical commitments: 'They tend to repeat the point that was made long ago, namely, that exegesis always has presuppositions. But the interesting question is not whether exegesis has presuppositions, but rather, what kinds of presuppositions . . .'.[190]

McKnight regards the use of reader-response approaches, not so much dispensing with the historical-critical method, but relativising it in light of a plethora of interpretive approaches available today. While this pluralism may lead to a scepticism resulting from the assumption that foundationalism is the only route to knowledge, McKnight identifies a crucial assumption of reader-response approaches: 'that knowledge (epistemology) is always related to life (ontology)

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186 Ibid., p.16.
187 Ibid.
188 Ibid., pp. 16-17.
189 Ibid., p.14.
190 Ibid., p.27.

and that the only sort of knowledge that really counts is knowledge grounded in life'.[191]

McKnight spends some considerable time looking at the mutual dependence of interpretation and human experience and concludes:

> Readers make *sense*. Readers may perform their role constrained by their cultural contexts and critical assumptions and remain unaware of their potential as creative readers. When readers become conscious of their role, the process of reading is altered. Readers regain their own voices. . . a share of the freedom of textual interpretation results from the fact that readers are no longer constrained by traditional dogmatic and/or historical-critical goals of reading and interpretation.[192]

But such 'freedom' requires further consideration.

Norman Holland concludes in 5 Readers Reading that different reading responses could be correlated with 'the reader's respective differences of identity, including their narrative experiences and personality types'.[193] Thiselton comments on the positive 'strengthening of an individual and corporate identity as one who has a stake in the texts and that to which they bear witness' as a welcome contribution of reader-response approaches but warns that the freedom to read and the way in which the reading reflects the identities of the readers implies '*the urgent need for a hermeneutic of suspicion in reading biblical texts*', lest we '*project our own interests, desires, and selfhood onto that which the biblical text proclaims*', and '*"construct" God in our own image through the reading processes*'.[194]

Thiselton notes however that if reading is 'within the frame of corporate evaluation and testing, the life-experience in question may enhance pre-understanding and

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191 McKnight, Post-Modern Use of the Bible, pp. 18 -19.

192 Ibid., p.161 (Italics McKnight's).

193 Norman Holland, 5 Readers Reading (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

194 Thiselton, New Horizons, p. 530. (italics Thiselton's). It is interesting to note that Holland's work suggests Thiselton offers a warning to the individualistic approach of personal Bible study, when that is undertaken without any sense of suspicion or evaluation by others in a faith community

weave meaning and textual force with emotional warmth and practices in life'.[195] For Thiselton it remains crucial that the text can continue to transform and correct readers '*from outside*'.[196]

One final work requires consideration. Thiselton's analysis continues to be useful. David Bleich,[197] in a similar fashion to Stanley Fish, identifies the importance of the reading community (or context) within which readers read, and how this community shapes and informs the resultant readings. Bleich however parts company with Fish over what constitutes a genuine community of readers. Attacking Fish who presupposes a community of readers means an academic community, 'rather than one from the classroom', Bleich suggests that Fish is too elitist, and that most reader-theories are 'tied to the lecture hall of the university, and ignore "the actual human use of texts and language"'.[198] A further contribution by Bleich is the way in which he envisions what constitutes a genuine community of readers. His 'double vision' 'enhances the wholeness of the dualities of male and female, individual and communal, subjective and inter-subjective, academy and classroom, the institutional and personal, the traditional and the creative.'[199]

This inclusiveness is commented upon in a doctoral dissertation by Mark Labberton, to whose work Thiselton now draws our attention. Labberton's 1990 thesis[200] notes the coherence between Bleich's 'double vision' and a theological tradition Labberton dates from the Reformation, which identifies the principle that 'reading biblical texts is an activity of the whole community, including the "*ordinary*" reader; not an exclusively male or white or "professional" and elitist activity.'[201] Thiselton summarises:

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195 Ibid., p.531.

196 Ibid.

197 David Bleich, The Double Perspective: Language, Literacy, and Social Relations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

198 Bleich, The Double Perspective, p. 17, quoted in Thiselton, New Horizons, p. 532. Bleich concludes that postmodernist theories of reading presents only what occurs in an 'academic fraternity with a French accent'. He also criticises the work of Jonathan Culler as far too immersed in theory.

199 Ibid., pp. 531-532.

200 Mark Labberton, 'Ordinary Bible Reading: The Reformed Tradition and Reader-Oriented Criticism' Ph.D Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1990.

201 Thiselton, New Horizons, p.532. (italics Thiselton's)

> Labberton recognises the value of reader-oriented theory in restoring neglected attention to the role of ordinary readers in the encounter between biblical texts and whole communities. Such theory *corrects a rationalist over-emphasis on the "professional" interpreter. It also calls attention to the fallacy of assuming that "natural" meaning would be perceived as "natural" from within any* given *tradition as if the notion were context-free.*[202]

In the context of another discussion in theology, Wayne Meeks arrives at a strikingly similar conclusion. Meeks[203] discusses the 'post-liberal' theological strategy of George Lindbeck and his contribution to theological theories of religious language.[204] Lindbeck describes three models of religion or theories of religious language, and their place historically as: cognitive-propositional (pre-modern), experiential-expressive (modern) and cultural-linguistic (postmodern). In the cultural-linguistic theory, religions resemble languages or cultures. Meeks agrees that religious expressions, interpretations and so hermeneutics are 'socially embodied'. Hence 'texts do not carry their meanings within themselves, but "mean" in so far as they function intelligibly within specific cultures or subcultures'.[205] Arguing that the theological program outlined by Lindbeck is too academic, indeed too intrasystematic and as such operating within one sub-culture only, Meeks comments that while an academic category is perfectly appropriate in a programmatic book about conversation among professional theologians, contemporary hermeneutics must engage *other* cultures or sub-cultures, or 'look to the non-elite culture'.[206]

The foregrounding of the reader as an active agent in the process of interpretation, and the recognition of the mutual dependence of human experience, ideological commitments and the reader's location within a reading community or context leads to the question foreshadowed in the above discussion: where is the reader

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202 Ibid., p.533. (italics Thiselton's)

203 W.A. Meeks 'A Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment' Harvard Theological Review 79,1986, pp. 176-186.

204 See George Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Doctrine in a Postliberal Age (London: SPCK, 1984).

205 Meeks 'A Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment', p.183.

206 Ibid.

located, and what effect does this location have upon the readings that take place within this location? Certainly as Bleich suggests the majority of readers in modern theology have been located in the classrooms and offices of the academies, to which we can also add the studies and rectories of the ecclesial space. Bleich's call for 'real' readers outside the academies resonates with Meeks, and the work of liberation theologians who suggest there is a place for the non-elite reader.

Based on the initial encounter of ordinary, indeed marginalised and disadvantaged ordinary real-readers reading in a small back street cafe in Kings Cross in Sydney, the following project developed and evolved. Postmodern theorising provided the basis upon which this research proceeded, with the intention of discovering what place ordinary real-readers have, in current hermeneutic discussion and issues surrounding the interpretation of biblical texts.

Conclusion

We have thus far discussed the antecedents of the reading process outlined above, and how that process builds on and develops certain aspects the work of West, Cardenal and Sinclair and others. Presuppositions and procedural aspects of the process have been identified and we have established the following tenets of our theoretical basis: the need to understand readers as active in the process of interpretation, and the need to identify the location of that process and the profile of the readers. Acknowledging that it is crucial to recognise that readers are all embodied within a particular context and social location, we now turn our attention to that particular context.

Chapter Three

Context

The Australian Context: History, Legend and Ideology

> I was born right - I don't have to develop! I am happy thru' and thru': . . . I don't care a straw about God and eternity because I am quite complete as I am. I don't have to behave morally - I AM good. In other words, I AM AN AUSTRALIAN.[207]

Analysis of Australian life, culture and theology reveals the difficulty of establishing a place for theological reflection in the Australian national character.

In Discovering an Australian Theology, Peter Kirkwood's comment: '. . . there is difficulty in doing theology in Australia because of some reticence in talking about ultimate questions; religion and God are not quite decent as subjects for discussion',[208] is strongly confirmed by Tony Kelly who suggests that there are 'many features of Australian culture natively resistant to any creative contextual theology'.[209] These 'native' features are identified as sectarianism, secular humanism, bland pragmatism and a repression of any serious search for philosophical or theological meaning.[210]

Theological and biblical studies in Australia have rarely been 'Australian'. As with culture, so too with theology - Australia has mirrored the cultural and theological developments of its colonisers - the British in particular, and the Europeans. As

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207 Percy Grainger, celebrated Australian pianist and composer, quoted in William Lawton, Being Christian Being Australian: Contemporary Christianity Downunder (Homebush West: Lancer, 1988), p. 27. (upper case Lawton's).

208 Peter Kirkwood, 'Two Australian poets as theologians: Les Murry and Bruce Dawe', p. 4

209 Kelly, in Malone, Ibid., p. 53.

210 Kelly notes: 'Such questions [of theology] sound far outside any Australian context when the summer sun is shining and the beer is cold, when radio reports of test cricket triumphs drift around the garden. This is not the atmosphere for unsettling talk, let alone theology!' Ibid., p. 56. Cp. John Thornhill, Making Australia : Exploring our National Conversation (Newtown: Millennium Books, 1992), whose discussion of the emergence of theology as part of the 'Australian conversation' is titled 'An Embarrassing Subject', pp. 167-204.

Breward notes: 'Until the 1960's, the pattern of theological education for both Protestants and Roman Catholics were deeply shaped by the events of the reformations of the sixteenth century.'[211] That this 'shaping' was the result of northern hemisphere religious and political history, rather than any 'indigenous' aspect of Australia, is confirmed by Stuart Piggin's study of Evangelical Christianity in Australia.[212] Identifying evangelicalism as the most common expression of Protestantism in Australian history, it is described as 'a conservative Protestant movement which grew out of the Protestant reformation of the sixteenth century, the English Puritanism of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Continental Pietism of the seventeenth and eighteen centuries, and the revivals of the 1730s and 1740s in Britain, Europe and America.'[213] Once again the influence of northern hemisphere religious movements is evident.[214]

What if anything then has given Australian theology or biblical studies any flavour that is 'Australian'? And how can what is 'Australian', or native features of Australian culture, be identified?

The Australian context or 'world' is a social construction rather than, for example, an empirical reality. As William Herzog says:

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211 Ian Breward, 'Historical Perspectives On Theological Education in Australasia', Lucas, 19 & 20, (1995-1996), p. 8. It should not be assumed that Australia has not produced notable biblical and theological scholars: Peter Carnley, Thorwald Lorenzen, Leon Morris, Philip Esler, Athol Gill, John Squires, Ken Manley, Robert Maddox, David Coffey, to name but a few. All of these scholars however have done the bulk of their theological training, most notably their post-graduate and doctoral training, in the Universities of the northern hemisphere. With the exception of Elaine Wainwright and Dorothy Lee, women remain almost invisible in terms of biblical and theological scholarship, while Indigenous people are only just beginning to have a voice in church and theology. As Lynne Hume notes: . . . for the moment, an Aboriginal Australian hermeneutic is still in its infancy, and in light of some of the conflicts between the fundamental premises of traditional Aboriginal religion and the Western interpretations of Christianity, it would seem that there exists a huge impasse', in 'The Rainbow Serpent, The Cross, and the Fax Machine: Australian Aboriginal Responses to the Bible' in Brett, Ethnicity and the Bible, p.360.

212 Stuart Piggin, Evangelical Christianity in Australia (Melbourne: OUP, 1996).

213 Ibid., p. vii.

214 Cp. Breward, Australia 'The Most Godless Place Under Heaven?' (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1991ed.), p. 88.

> World . . . is a deep structure of assumptions and expectations about the social, political, economic order as well as the properly ordained arrangement for life in this setting. As such, world is always accompanied by a set of powerful sanctions which seek to root the present order in the will of higher powers.[215]

An answer to these questions can only be arrived at after a consideration of some of the historical, cultural and ideological features that give shape to this Australian 'world', and the impact these have had on the shape of theology and hermeneutics in this country. We also need to recognise that religion, theology and ways in which the text is read and interpreted, may either legitimate the dominant social construction of reality or attempt to question or subvert it. The development of an Australian Christianity, it appears, has until more recent times overwhelmingly legitimated the dominant view of social reality, rather than questioning or subverting it.

History

The record of history is never simply a statement of what was. The historian, as Manning Clark suggests, imposes his or her order 'on the chaos'[216] of available memory however retained, but it is *his* or *her* order, and more often than not it is the history of those in power. History is therefore part of the social construction of reality, as the historian reflects and selects his or her community's sense of what is significant and self-reflective of understanding, and is often written in a manner that does not disclose the story of those on the underside of history.

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215 William Herzog, 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Discovery of the Apocalyptic Jesus,' Pacific Theological Review 19, 1, (Spring 1985), p. 32. See also Geert Hofstede Cultures and Organisations (Harper Collins, London, 1994). Hofstede identifies that culture is learnt, not inherited and is derived from one's social environment and the mental programming inherent in that environment. Hofstede also argues that culture should be distinguished from human nature, which in turn he defines as 'what all human beings have in common at the universal level', and from an individual's personality, concluding 'although exactly where the borders lie between human nature and culture, and between culture and personality, is a matter of discussion among social scientists'. See pp. 4 - 5.

216 Manning Clark, 'A Discovery of Australia', 1976 Boyer Lecture (Sydney: ABC, 1976), p. 12.

Original Sin: Genocide and Ethnocide.

No clearer is this the case than in the 'history' of white occupation of this land - our *original sin*.[217] Australia's self awareness as a population of white colonisers, whose historical foreparents were responsible for the occupation of Aboriginal land, two centuries of the destruction of Aboriginal culture and spirituality, the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their mothers and fathers, and numerous massacres of Aboriginal people, is still emerging. Australian history, by and large, until the Bicentennial celebrations in 1988, has been written to reinforce an image of a stable, well-integrated, prosperous, egalitarian and inclusive society, which has provided great benefits in a land of enormous opportunity, for all its inhabitants, over the last two hundred and ten years. Indigenous history reveals another image, the experience of genocide and ethnocide.[218]

Essential to the 1788 voyage of Captain Arthur Philip was the ideology of 'discovery', through which European nations claimed sovereignty over 'new' lands.[219] Undergirding this ideology of expansion was the idea of *terra nullius* - literally, 'a land without owners'. Under British law this meant that Aboriginal people did not exist. Whether this claim upon new lands was one of sovereignty or actual ownership of the real estate, the 1788 view, based upon the perception of Joseph Banks,[220] was that Australia was either uninhabited or that Aboriginal

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217 Denis Edwards echoes the emerging consciousness of many white Australians that the occupation of Australia and the resultant cultural genocide and destruction of Aboriginal humanity is Australia's 'original lie' or 'communal sin'. So Edwards, 'Sin and Salvation in the South Land of the Holy Spirit' in Malone, pp. 90-98. John Thornhill notes how the first white Australians 'turned their backs' on what he identifies as the 'remarkable respect' for human rights and dignity he attributes to Western culture during the eighteenth century Enlightenment. His suggestion appears to be that the isolation and harshness of the 'new land' in and of itself led to this reaction, which evolved into the ideology of white supremacy, and finally to a 'conspiracy of silence' about the history of occupation and genocide that marked the first two centuries of colonisation. See Thornhill, pp. 52-75.

218 So Nigel Parbury, Survival: A History of Aboriginal Life in New South Wales (Sydney: Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs of the NSW Government, 1986/1988), is one example of the writing of Aboriginal history (since occupation), from an Aboriginal perspective.

219 See Henry Reynolds, The Law of the Land (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987); also Frank Farrell, 'Who Discovered Australia?' in Themes in Australian History (Kensington: NSWUP, 1990), pp. 1-21.

220 Joseph Banks was the botanist who travelled with James Cook in 1770. His evidence given to the House of Commons in Great Britain following his return identifies the population of Australia to be no more than fifty Aboriginal people. Journals of the House of Commons 1778-1780 (vol. 37, reprinted 1830), p. 311 in Bill Murray, Crisis, Conflict and Consensus:

people did not actually own the land, as they displayed no 'visible concept of property. The accompanying mythology which supported the colonial occupation of Australia was that sovereignty over the land was gained by peaceful settlement rather than conquest. This concept of *terra nullius* is central to current debates in Australia regarding native title and ownership of the land.

John Harris[221] identifies an imported ideology, arriving with the very first settlers, based upon both theological and philosophical assumptions about 'civilisation' and the supremacy of European 'civilisation'. The theological assumption was based on 'Archbishop Ussher's chronology', whereby the curse of Ham was applied to the Aboriginal race, with the conclusion that the Aborigines were 'the lowest scale of degraded humanity'[222] who lack 'all moral views and impressions'.[223] The philosophy of John Locke, the scientific assumptions of evolution, and the white/black dichotomy in Western thought all contributed to the ideology of white supremacy[224] that has permeated so much of Australian society for the past two centuries. Its influence on the Australian experience, notes Veronica Brady, is on-going: '. . . Australia today, as in the past, exemplifies this problem, the complicity of Christendom with the European conquest of the rest of the world, a conquest which rests on the perversion of Christianity in which white is set against black as good is set against evil, believer to unbeliever, civilised to savage, superior to inferior'.[225] To this extent, Brady argues, Australian society is dependent upon a pseudo-theological justification for the place of Aboriginal (and minority) people

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Select Documents Illustrating 200 Years in the Making of Australia (Sydney: Rigby, 1984), pp. 5-7.

221 John Harris, One Blood: 200 years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1990). Harris' lengthy work details the failure of 'missionary' enterprise amongst Aboriginal people in Australia, but also highlights where there were significant attempts to address the genocide of Aboriginal people and their culture.

222 William Hull, 'Remarks on the Probable Origin and Antiquity of the Aboriginal Natives of NSW', 1846, quoted in Ibid, p. 30.

223 Thomas Dove, 'Moral and social characteristics of the Aborigines in Tasmania', Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science 1.4, 1842, quoted in Ibid. See also Piggin, Evangelical Christianity, p. 21.

224 The black/white dichotomy as part of Western thought associates 'white' with cleanliness, purity, and light and 'black' with sin, dirt, night and evil. See discussion in Harris, pp. 22-32.

225 Veronica Brady Caught in the Draught (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994), p.262; see also Abdul Jan Mohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonist Literature', in H.E. Gates, (Ed.), 'Race', Writing and Difference (London: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp. 78-106.

within it - 'the identification of Christianity with Europe and the white people with God's chosen people'.[226]

Statistically, Indigenous people in Australia continue to represent the 'underside' of our history. Life expectancy for the Aboriginal population is fifteen years lower than for other Australians; thirty-eight percent are unemployed compared to ten percent of other Australians;[227] while in June 1996 the number of Indigenous prisoners in Australia averaged nineteen percent of all prisoners, with an imprisonment rate of 1,764 per 1000 adults, eighteen times greater than the non-Indigenous rate of imprisonment.[228] 'In short, an Aborigine is much more likely than other Australians to be in one or more of the following states: sick, unemployed, uneducated, poor, imprisoned or dead.'[229]

Australian society is divided over the question of justice for Aboriginal people, and apology and reparation for what has taken place.[230] The rise of Pauline Hanson,[231] the Mabo decision[232], the Bringing Them Home report[233] and the current controversy regarding the High Court of Australia decision handed down

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226 Ibid. Racism in Australia has tangible expressions. Indigenous people were not given voting rights in the Australian 'democratic' process until 1967, and were not included in any national census until 1971.

227 A.B.S, 'Australian Social Trends Seminar', First Release Figures 1996 National Census, Public Lecture, Sydney, 29th October 1997.

228 A.B.S., Australian Social Trends 1997 (Canberra: ABS, 1997), p. 188.

229 'The Facts that Shame Australia', SMH, November 27, 1987, p. S4.

230 See Jeannette Johnson, Unfinished Business: Australians and Reconciliation (Melbourne: Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1996).

231 Pauline Hanson, previously a Liberal (conservative) candidate for the Queensland Federal seat of Oxley, was sacked by her Party due to 'racist statements'. Hanson then stood successfully as an Independent, on a racist platform, and has founded the One Nation Party. This signals a small, but not insignificant resurgence of white racism in the north of Australia.

232 In June 1992 the Mabo High Court of Australia decided that Indigenous people had rights to their land before the arrival of colonisers and held that the common law of Australia recognises a form of Native Title to land. Terra nullius was repealed and the 'lie' that Aboriginals were nomadic without any set laws was dispelled. The Native Title Act came into effect on January 1, 1994 and incorporated the common law Native Title rights recognised in the Mabo Case.

233 National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, Bringing Them Home (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). The Inquiry identified political and church policies that led to the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their parents, and called for a public apology from the Federal government.

on Wik[234], all point to the presence of unresolved racist tensions in both the cultural and theological conversations present in Australian society.

The call from the conservative Senator Warren Entsch for 'good country people to boycott the churches'[235] is evidence of the ongoing and emerging development of a theology and understanding of reality in Australia that foregrounds justice and commences to critique and unmask ideological positions and national myths.

Criminal Colonisers.

An important historical factor in Australia's current cultural and theological conversation is our convict fore-fathers and mothers.

The first 'settlers' of this land were convicts - convicted 'criminals' sentenced by the British government to 'transportation' to a 'colony' which in its early years, before the influx of 'free settlers', was little more than an extensive gaol.[236] Identified by Hughes as a 'new colonial experiment' designed to 'swallow a whole class-the "criminal class"', the colony was created for pragmatic reasons.[237]

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234 On 30th June 1993 the Wik people made a claim for native title to land on Cape York Peninsula. The Thayorre people joined the claim. The land to which the claim was made contained pastoral leases granted by the Queensland Government to graziers. The Wik and Thayorre people argued that native title co-existed with the pastoral leases. On January 29 1996, Justice Drummond in the Federal Court made a decision that the claim could not succeed as the areas were subject to pastoral leases. This was appealed and on December 23 1996 the High Court of Australia delivered a judgement that the grant of a pastoral lease does not mean the extinguishment of native title rights. The response by the current federal Government (the conservative Liberal Party) has been to seek amendments to the Native Title Act of 1992 that will extinguish native title over lands under a pastoral lease - attempting 75to overturn the High Court decision.

235 SMH, November 21, 1997, p. 1.

236 Jan Kociumbas, The Oxford History of Australia Vol. 2 (Melbourne: OUP, 1992); especially chapters 1 & 2; also C.M.H. Clark, A History of Australia Vol. 1 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974 ed.), especially chapter 6 ; Clark indicates the enormous number of convicts transported from Great Britain, totalling thirty-seven thousand six hundred and six from the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 and the 20th November 1823, see pp. 90ff.

237 Robert Hughes, The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787-1868 (London: Collins Harvill, 1987), p. 1.

Those responsible for the convicts' captivity, whether chaplains or gaolers, apparently regarded their charges in much the same way as the Aboriginal population - 'sub-human and beyond any persuasion but violent repression'.[238]

It has often been observed that the first arrivals onto Aboriginal land were not religious pilgrims or people seeking a new society, but women and men who had been caught in the social dislocation of the agrarian and industrial revolutions and who found themselves punished by harsh laws designed to protect the privilege and property of the landed gentry and newly emerging industrial middle class. Many were Irish dissidents protesting the oppression and landlessness imposed by their English overlords.

Piggin, after canvassing alternative views, rightly concludes that the convicts who began white settlement in Australia were 'working class, wage earning victims of poverty (not full-time thieves) who fell foul of the law'.[239] Their social location as 'working class', rather than 'convicts', was the most significant factor in the relationship between early Australian Protestant evangelicalism and these first settlers: 'If there is any truth in the stereotype of the Australian as indifferent, even hostile, to doctrinal distinctions and apathetic to all religion, it may be explicable in terms of the emphasis which the convict experience gave to that predisposition inherent in working-class victims of Britain's Industrial Revolution.'[240]

Empowering this 'hostility' was the convict perception that Christian religion was part of the system victimising them.[241] This was no more tangible than in the appointment in 1795 by Governor Hunter of the Rev. Samuel Marsden, the Senior Chaplain of New South Wales, as a clerical magistrate. As a clergyman and a magistrate, Marsden was particularly strict and harsh, and this severity is identified

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238 Breward, Australia, p. 2.
239 Piggin, Evangelical Christianity, p. 10
240 Ibid., p.14
241 Ibid.

by many as the major factor in the development in Australia of an ethos of anticlericalism.[242]

The establishment of the church for the ruling class, and its irrelevance for the convict class, was a belief embraced by convicts who eventually became emancipists.[243] Both Thornhill and Russel Ward[244] identify the birth of the legend of 'mateship' as having its roots in the settlement of Australia by convicts. 'Mateship' has central to its self-understanding a history of hostility and rivalry between the convict/emancipist/lower/working classes and the 'masters' or governing bodies. This in turn has led to the 'legendary' and 'mythical' refusal of Australians to acknowledge their 'superiors', even in the Defence Forces.[245] The myth of egalitarianism in Australia also has its historical roots in the movement of convicts into Australian society as 'free' or emancipated citizens. We will return to this issue in more depth when we discuss class in Australia.

Sectarianism.

A further historical influence upon Australia's current national character has been sectarianism and its by-products.[246] Hans Mol observes: 'Sectarian hatred and

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242 Ibid., pp. 13 & 20; Hughes describes Marsden as a 'grasping Evangelical missionary with heavy shoulders and the face of a petulant ox, who subjected 'convicts to draconian punishment - hence his nickname, "The Flogging Parson"', and his vitriolic hatred of Catholicism, especially Irish Catholicism, in The Fatal Shore, pp. 187-189.

243 So Brady notes: '. . . from the beginning of settlement religion was generally connected with the establishment. Anglican ministers blessed the convict system, and even helped to administer it, while dissenters rapidly rose to wealth and power, blessing them too. The Roman Catholic church, initially the church of the poor and the persecuted, has shown a similar willingness to establish networks of power and patronage as its congregations become more affluent. . . In general, then, the churches have been enthusiastic apologists for propriety, property and appropriation, and enemies of radial thought, especially as far as sexuality or women's rights are concerned', in Caught, p. 273.

244 Russel Ward, The Australian Legend (Melbourne: OUP, 1958).

245 Thornhill, see discussion pp. 94-97; also Hugh Mackay, Reinventing Australia, p.134. This is identified in Hofstede's study Cultures and Organisations, as a dimension of culture called uncertainty avoidance index or tolerance level of ambiguity. In Australia the data revealed a comparatively low level of uncertainty avoidance. This characteristic identifies the sharpest difference with Australia's colonial fore-parents. In this type of society, rules and regulations are not more than is necessary, uncertainty is an accepted feature of daily life, aggression and emotions are generally not be shown, precision and punctuality have to be learnt, and family rules are fairly relaxed. See pp. 111-125.

246 Piggin notes that 'sectarianism occurs when different denominations or religions compete with each other for state or civil endorsement of their particular belief or values or standards', in Evangelical Christianity, p. 34.

interdenominational squabbles have been evident throughout most of the . . . years of Australian settlement'.[247]

A number of factors conspired to make Australian sectarianism both intense and distinctive. The initial establishment of the Church of England as a prison chaplaincy was an exclusive position that was soon challenged in the colony. This lead to the Bourke Church Act of 1836. This Act cemented the abolition of the Church and Schools Corporation Act of 1833, which had established privileges for the Church of England, including from 1825 the exclusive right to establish schools. Australia's emerging education system was to become a focus for sectarian bitterness. The Bourke Church Act, however, strengthened all major denominations through subsidies for stipends and the erection of church buildings, and recognised the equality of all religions before the law.[248]

An additional factor in the sectarianism of early Australia was the number of Irish Catholics in the colony. Irish Catholics were comparatively higher in number than in the British population generally, contributing to the power and presence of the Roman Catholic community in Australia.[249] This presence advanced both an ethnic and class conflict, with Irish Catholics identifying with the lower working classes, while the English, Scottish and Protestant Irish situated themselves in the middle and ruling classes. This conflict exhibited itself in the form of riots in Melbourne in 1843 and 1846.[250]

Numerous historical examples could be provided to illustrate the depth of the sectarian division[251] which was still apparent in the 1960s. One commentator wrote:

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247 Hans Mol, Religion in Australia : A Sociological Investigation (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1971), p. 141.
248 Piggin, Evangelical Christianity, pp. 28-29.
249 Breward, Australia, pp. 13-16.
250 Piggin, Evangelical Christianity, pp. 35-35.
251 See Mol, Religion, pp. 141-145.

> The stupidity and ferocity of their hatred is often beyond belief. . . The Anglican Church, which should take a lead in fighting these views, is itself dominated by low churchmen and evangelicals, some of Ulster origin, who often add fuel to the fires . . . inspired by a fear and jealousy of the Catholic Church, which is strong, militant, highly organised and steadily increasing in strength. Some of it, regrettably, is racial - a hangover from the English prejudice against the Irish. [252]

In the past two-and-a-half decades, interdenominational rivalry has been somewhat reduced by the co-operation engendered in the Australian Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches). Ecumenism however has not been embraced by all. The Anglican Diocese of Sydney remains openly suspicious of Roman Catholic and Charismatic expressions of the faith, and The Baptist Union of Churches in New South Wales has amply illustrated in recent years that sectarian bitterness is still a potent factor in local congregations.[253] As Lawton notes, sectarian bitterness and conflict has in many ways led to a 'fractured Christianity turned inward on self-preservation'.[254]

Secularism.

Social and cultural commentators around the world have often observed that Australia is the most secular nation on earth.[255] Denham Grierson identifies the historical roots of Australian secularism, a further factor in the contemporary Australian 'world' and how it manifests itself today:

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252 P. Pringle, Australian Accent, 1963, p. 86, quoted in Mol, Religion, p.145

253 This is apparent in the author's own church denomination. As recently as 1986 the Baptist Union of New South Wales was forced to withdraw from an ecumenical consortium of Theological Colleges due to the furore created by a Scottish and an Irish Baptist coalition within the Baptist Union of Churches. Two booklets published by J.O. Hogg, Triumph or Tragedy? (Stanmore: Stanmore Baptist Church, 1985), and Ecumenism: A Serious Cause for Dissenting (Stanmore: Stanmore Baptist Church, 1986) were circulated to all affiliated churches of the Union. The foreword by the Rev. John Farr to 'Triumph or Tragedy' sets the tone for what follows: 'My own conviction is simply this, that we as Baptists are being inexorably enmeshed in ecumenism; our own distinctives are being enshrouded in the teaching of other denominations including the church of Rome. . . . I have been standing against this degenerate situation. . . I have sought to urge withdrawal from this spiritually calamitous affiliation', p. iii. For details of the controversy see Piggin, Evangelical, pp. 183-184.

254 Lawton, Being Christian, p.14.

255 Breward, Australia, p. 86.

> In 1788 when Governor Philip planted the British flag on Australian soil to declare the beginning of the colony of New South Wales, no prayers or readings were offered . . . There was in this event no sense of election, no discernment of Australia as the land of the Holy Spirit, no conviction about a manifest destiny under God . . . In 1988, two hundred years after the founding event of white settlement, the original intention of the Labour Government was to have the new Parliament House in Canberra . . . opened without reference to any religious dimension. Protest from the churches forced the government to make the changes in the opening ceremony.[256]

However, Breward argues that there is a cluster of meanings around the word "secular", some of which can be hostile to Christianity, some natural and some friendly. He goes on to argue that some features of Australian secularity have deeply Christian roots, and that the religious neutrality of some of the most important institutions in our society, like the state school systems, has been a guarantee of religious freedom.[257]

Breward also observes that there have been heavy costs in the Australian rejection of established churches, impoverishing the public domain and needlessly privatising religious commitment. He notes 'Protestants must take some responsibility for that, for it represents part of their teaching, with the transcendent removed and the community ignored'.[258] Brady also notes that the exclusion of religion from education, at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels has marginalised religion and enhanced the process of secularisation. This in turn excludes the language and symbols of Christian faith from the pattern of meanings in Australian culture which, 'being determinedly secular, has tended to turn its symbols into signs, limiting their implications to those dictated by journalists, politicians and economists', leading to a pragmatism devoid of any spirituality, and leaving religious belief peripheral to intellectual life, and the development of the nation.[259]

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256 Denham Grierson, A People on the Way: Congregation, Mission & Australian Culture (Melbourne: David Lovell Publishing, 1991), p. 5.

257 Ibid.

258 Ibid., p.87.

259 Brady, Caught, pp. 273-274. Brady's observation is well supported in the writings of Australian intellectuals searching for a national identity. For example Donald Horne, The Lucky Country (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1964) urged Australians to face the challenge of

However, since the 1960s, with the increasing multi-culturalism evident in Australian society, there has been a marked increase in the variety of Australian religiosity.[260] The 'myth' of Australian secularity has been scrutinised in recent months in light of a number of major tragedies in Australia, in response to which public requests for 'prayer' by the churches provoked a huge response.[261]

A more clearly identified aspect of Australian secularity has been the lack of faculties in theology and biblical studies in Australian Universities. Until the 1964 Martin Report on Education in Australia, theology as an academic discipline was not available through any University.[262] A direct result of the anti-intellectual and secular nature of Australian society,[263] only in the past two decades has academic theological study been available outside denominationally based theological colleges, a major difference between the pursuit of theological studies in Australia and in Britain and Europe. Piggin notes: 'since these denominations are non-Australian in origin, theological thinking has not been sufficiently directed at needs arising from Australian culture and society'.[264]

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emerging nationhood, arguing that in this process there is no place for Christianity. So too Craig McGregor, Profile of Australia (Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 1966) where he identifies Christianity as obstructionist to the development of an Australian identity.

260 See Peter Bentley, 'Tricia Blombery & Philip Hughs, Faith Without the Church (Kew: Christian Research Association, 1992) and Philip Hughs, Craig Thompson, Rohan Pryor & Gary Bouma, Believe It or Not : Australian Spirituality and the Churches in the 90s (Kew: Christian Research Association, 1995).

261 The Port Arthur massacre in April 1996 and the Thredbo tragedy of August 1997 are the two most recent examples. In media reports (SMH, 2 July 1996, p. 2, and SMH, 8 August 1997, p.9, for example) the role of chaplains and the use of religious language was a significant public identification of faith and the role of the church in society. As Breward concludes: 'The relationship between the secular and religious elements and tendencies in Australian culture and society continues to be uncertain, complex, ambivalent', in Australia, p.92

262 Piggin, 'A History of Theological Education in Australia', Lucas 19 & 20,1995-1996, p. 25.

263 Piggin comments: 'The notion of the "Christian scholar" has not been an honoured concept in the Australian Christian Church. Scholarship is condemned in Christian congregations by anti-intellectuals (a common breed in Australia) of being "not kingdom work" and not "working at the coalface"', in Ibid.; see also discussion in Brady, Caught, pp. 272-283.

264 Piggin, 'A History', p. 25.

Some Conclusions.

Historical factors that have shaped the Australian 'world' or context are, to summarise the discussion above, the occupation of Aboriginal land and the attendant cultural and spiritual genocide of Aboriginal peoples, the fact that colonisation took place with 'convicts' primarily from the British and Irish working classes, and the phenomena of sectarianism and secularism. From these various historical roots have surfaced some of the myths and ideologies identified as part of the Australian character or 'world', specifically racism, nationalism, mateship, egalitarianism, anticlericalism and to some extent the myth of anti-intellectualism. It is to some of these myths and ideologies we now turn.

Ideology and Myth

John Thornhill in his work Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation, identifies the myths and ideologies he considers to have shaped the Australian 'conversation'.[265] Theology in Australia has undoubtedly been influenced by these myths and ideologies.

A British Heritage.

It is not surprising that as a British colony, a complex amalgam of mythological, ideological and cultural elements of the British tradition 'provided an essential and in many ways dominant component of the provincial conversation of early Australia.'[266] Imported to an 'alien environment',[267] Protestantism, Catholicism and the Enlightenment heavily influenced the character and world-view of Australia. An imported Enlightenment reaction to the highly sacralised culture that had dominated medieval Europe championed secular order and human reason,

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265 Thornhill notes it is not difficult to recognise the relationship between ideology and mythology as a subtle and complex one, and that ideologies often have roots of a mythological kind even if these are not acknowledged, p. 45.

266 Ibid., p. 47.

267 Clark, 'A Discovery of Australia', p. 29.

which combined with the 'native' historical factors identified above, cemented the already ambiguous relationship between Christian tradition and secular government in the colony. [268]

Thornhill identifies the 'adolescent period' of Australia's growth as a time for utopian dreaming, a mix of the ideology of 'progress' and 'improvement', the acceptance of social Darwinianism and the task of creating a society supposedly along purely 'rational lines'.[269] The European concept of progress, and the 'English notion of Improvement,' Donald Horne suggests, 'was the most convincing imported idea'.[270]

Northern hemisphere Romanticism, reacting to Enlightenment a-historical rationality, fostered nationalism, which in Australia was particularly linked with the 'grand enterprise of British imperialism'.[271] This is most clearly exemplified in the writings of C.W.E. Bean, whose ideal Australian 'bushman', a unique 'Australian' being, was utilised to bolster the ideology of imperial nationalism and its obvious off-spring, racism. For Bean, if Australia was to reach its full potential, it required an influx of 'white British population'.[272]

But the Australian bushman and the Australian bush were not the exclusive myths of Bean. The mythology of the bush portraying the rugged individual, who struggles against the world and calls no-one master, is one of the most pervasive images of Australia. Taken up by writers, artists and journalists who initiated an Australian literature and image towards the end of the nineteenth century, and perpetuated until the present day through the media, the concept of the bush as a

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268 Thornhill, pp. 55-59. Also Clark who notes: 'In Australia they [the churches] confronted men who were influenced by the teaching of the Enlightenment, men that is, who were sustained by the hope that once mankind had liberated itself from the infamy about depravity and impotence, then men could perfect themselves here on earth.', in 'A Discovery of Australia', p. 2.

269 Thornhill, pp. 64-69

270 Horn, Ideas For The Nation (Sydney: Pan Books, i989) p. 73.

271 Thornhill, p. 59

272 C.W.E. Bean, quoted in Thornhill, p. 63; note Bean identified the qualities and virtues of the Australian 'bushman' in conquering the bush frontier in Australia, as ' only drawn from the British race, because the people of Australia are as purely British as the people of Great Britain - perhaps more so than the population of London'.

place of freedom, wholeness, escape, opportunity and 'mateship', enshrining values and attitudes essentially Australian, has been established.[273]

A Fair Go.

From this mythology arose a number of unique Australian legends, all contributing to the ideological character of Australia. The legend of a 'fair go' for everyone has its birth in the ethos of the bush, where, following emancipation, convicts had the opportunity to develop the land, equally, with those who were coming to the colony as free settlers. This myth of equal opportunity developed into the egalitarian 'creed', whereby 'every man should start fair in life, and have the same chance of making his way through the world.'[274] The negative corollary of this legend, however, is the understanding that with equality of opportunity and a 'fair go', those who suffer poverty in Australia are responsible for their own difficulties. The myth of egalitarianism is a discussion to which we shall return.

Mateship and Individualism.

Another 'bush' legend arising out of the unique experience of Australia is the legend of mateship, to which we have already referred. The concept of equal, rugged individuals, with a dislike for affectation, a like for heavy drinking, not afraid of hard work, who prefer the company of 'mates' to women, may have suffered in terms of popularity over the last three decades with the increasing urbanisation of Australia, but is none the less a distinctive legend embodying ideologies of

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273 Thornhill, p. 5; Manning Clark in 'A Discovery of Australia' suggests the 'bush' also signified innocence, specifically in contrast to the 'town' or urban world (p.11), while Russel Ward, in The Australian Legend attempts to trace the development of the 'mystique' of the 'bush', and its place in the Australian psyche, a 'mystique' he maintains developed by a group of 'bush workers' with an influence on Australian mythology completely disproportionate to their numerical or economic strength. In contemporary Australia the 'bush' has become more an 'escape to nature', than the place of myth and legend. Brian Lewis in 'Religious and Moral Values: Australia Then and Now,' National Outlook September 1987, has suggested that the beach is now the dominant symbol of urban Australians, with the bush receding in significance for contemporary Australians as part of their mythology, p.15.

274 Thornhill, p. 91

patriarchy, racism, and nationalism.[275] The mateship legend also gave rise to what has become known in Australia as the 'tall poppy' syndrome, where those who appear to rise beyond the myth of equality are 'cut down to size'.[276] As a combination of myths of the bush, mateship, egalitarianism and 'having a go' at authority, Ned Kelly, a notorious 'bushranger' has become a national hero - despite the way in which he took other people's lives and possessions.[277] In a similar way, the Anzac legend embodied all the masculine rugged individualism of the 'bush', despite it being Australia's greatest war-time defeat.

Geert Hofstede's study of international cultures confirms the characteristic of individualism in Australian culture. In this study Australia was, after the USA, and immediately before Great Britain, the most individualistic and least collectivist country in the study.[278]

Individualistic countries share the same political and economic systems, generally reflecting Adam Smith's assumption that the pursuit of 'self-interest by individuals through an "invisible hand" would lead to the maximal wealth of nations'. The rights of the individual, and 'liberty', are preferred to equality. Ideologies of individual freedom prevail over ideologies of equality.[279] Hofstede confirms that individualism is a strong factor in the Australian 'world'.

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275 See Ward's description of this legend, pp. 1-2. Thornhill discusses the way in which the legend of mateship surfaced and was reinforced by Australian literature, pp. 98-101. A recent celluloid version of the Australian cultural hero as 'bushman' was the internationally popular role of Paul Hogan in *Crocodile Dundee* - the myth lives on!

276 See discussion in Thornhill, pp. 103-105; also Mackay, Reinventing, pp. 134-135.

277 See discussion Ibid., p.110.

278 This dimension of culture was defined in the study as : '*Individualism* pertains *to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism* as its opposite pertains to *societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty*', in Hofstede, p. 51 (italics Hofstede's). See also Table 3.1, Ibid., p. 53.

279 Ibid., pp. 71-73

Liberal Democratic Capitalism.

Australia, like other nations, had to come to terms with the horror of the First World War, compounded by the Great Depression and then the Second World War. Utopian concepts of progress and improvement were severely modified by these events, and evolved more clearly into the competition of liberal democratic capitalism.[280]

Australia is a nation that arose from and has been built on the ideologies of capitalism and industrialisation. Capitalism involves rational economic activity; it is systematic, calculated and concerned with the goals of business enterprise. Its concern is above all with profit. It is dependent on an ethos or model of conduct involving self-control, methodical habits, frugality and investment, rational division of labour and factory discipline, and a supportive political and legal system. The Protestant values of self-control and discipline, labour as vocation, austerity, thrift, standardised consumption, institutionalised charity and carefully regulated social relationships are all supportive of capitalism.[281] It is not surprising that the church experience in Australia, arriving as part of the military, social and political establishment, has rarely responded critically to the ideology of capitalism, but rather through passivity has thus unselfconsciously promoted the political, economic and commercial activities that undergird the capitalist enterprise.

Parallel to this ideology, Hugh Collins suggests it is the social philosophy of Jeremy Bentham that provided the basis of Australian political life. This social philosophy is essentially utilitarian and secular, founding social order upon individual interests, as distinct from natural rights. For Bentham, political institutions are human contrivances, not divinely ordained. The Benthamite

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280 Note Brady's incisive comment: 'The myth of progress . . . based as it is on neo-Darwinian assumptions, has become the equivalent of fate, with violence, politely called competition, its way of life', in Caught, p. 276.

281 See discussion in J. Playford & D. Kirsner, Australian Capitalism (Ringwood: Penguin, 1972) and also Mario Miegge, 'The Protestant in Bourgeois History', in Julio de Santa Ana (Ed.) Separation Without Hope? (Geneva: WCC, 1978), pp. 9-10.

position, Collins suggests, shapes public life in Australia as an ideology, which might also be called individualistic utilitarianism.[282] This utilitarianism may have also combined with other aspects of the Australian character, identified by Russell Ward as a 'profound suspicion of authority and pretentiousness[283] to produce one of the most remarkable facts of Australian political life: the way in which the radical extremes of either the right or the left have never been able to establish themselves in political life.[284] Politically in Australia the Labor Party has traditionally identified with the working class, the Liberal Party with the upper middle and upper class, and the National Party with the farmers and graziers. Today the major political parties represent the interests of the middle class, the most dominant number of the voting population. The parties are centralist and almost indistinguishable. The Pauline Hanson phenomenon, a movement from the radical right, has already begun to extinguish itself after only eighteen months of political life.

Hedonistic Consumption.

Capitalism and individualism combine to create another aspect of the Australian 'world': the preoccupation of Australian society with material prosperity in the present and economic expansion in the future. Veronica Brady refers to the 'easy-going, unthinking hedonism' which has often been said to be 'typically Australian'.[285] Combined with consumerism, the parallels between developed western nations and Australia are readily apparent. As Avery Dulles describes the 'cultural syndrome' of 'consumerism', he notes that 'each individual is seen

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282 Hugh Collins, 'Political Ideology in Australia', in Australia: The Daedalus Symposium discussed in Thornhill, pp. 84-85.

283 Ward notes: 'Our profound suspicion of authority and pretentiousness provides some safeguard against the main danger of our times: dictatorship from either the right or the left . . . it is possibly harder to imagine a Hitler, a Stalin or even a Peron flourishing here than in any other country on earth, including England itself', p. 258 ; see also Thornhill, pp. 77-79 & 119.

284 See Hofstede, pp. 39.

285 Brady, A Crucible of Prophets, p. 1, quoted in Thornhill, p. 80

primarily as a consumer, and heavy consumption is viewed as the key to social well-being.'[286]

This, combined with a domestic capitalist economy dependent to a large extent upon the real estate industry, has led to the unique place in the Australian 'world' of home ownership and its place as a social indicator of 'success'. For the dominant class group in Australia, the middle class, the family home is the major possession.[287] The availability of land, and the possibility of home ownership for the majority of Australians, combines to stigmatise 'public' housing (or 'council' housing as it is called in Britain). Those who are dependent upon Government subsidised and owned housing are identified as 'failures' in Australian society.

Patriarchy.

One further ideology, that of patriarchy, is evident in a variety of ways in Australian society. As we noted above, women have not fitted in easily to this mateship ideal.[288] Women were more likely to be seen as those requiring protection, the weaker partner in the bush, yet sentimentalised as the perfect home-maker and mother of pioneering children. Such an understanding of women and their place in society (or rather in the home) took an explosive turn in the 1970s with the rising awareness of gender inequalities through the work of women like Germain Greer and Kate Millett. As with Indigenous history, research since the 1970s has sought to uncover the 'hidden' history of convict women and women settlers.[289] The

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286 Avery Dulles, quoted in Ibid.

287 In Australia there is no great limit to the supply of land, hence the phenomenon in Sydney known as the urban sprawl, 'with a population of 3.741 million, covering a land area of 12,138 square kilometres, it is one of the most sprawled cities in the world, with one of the lowest population densities of any major metropolitan area.' SMH, October 16, 1997; Domain, p. 8

288 So Thornhill, pp. 81-82.

289 For example, Helen Henley, Australia's Founding Mothers (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1978); Babette Smith, A Cargo of Women (Kensington: NSWUP, 1988); Ann Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police (Ringwood: Penguin, 1975). Also see Hofstede, pp. 80-93. In Hofstede's study of dimensions of national cultures Australia scored a high index in the dimension of masculinity as opposed to femininity. The former is identified with assertive behaviour and the latter with modest behaviour. '*Masculinity* pertains to societies in which social gender roles are clearly distinct (i.e., men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focussed on material success whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life)'.

question of gender equality in Australia has emerged in the same way in which it has for other Western women. This question has also been, like theology, influenced in its development by those issues identified above as part of the unique Australian character.[290]

While modest gains have been made in secular society,[291] nowhere has patriarchy been more apparent than in the church, most significantly in the context of Sydney, a matter for further discussion. Women in the context of the ecclesiastical 'world' in Sydney occupy a particularly marginalised position.[292]

Class in Australia

Craig McGregor argues that it is impossible to understand Australia or the lives of Australians without reference to class. His study Class in Australia[293] identifies and analyses the 'upper class, middle class and working class', and describes the myth of egalitarianism in Australia as a 'sour joke':

> It helps explain everything from lifestyles to Aussie accents, from voting patterns to real estate prices, from TV soaps to social climbers to the policies of the Labor Party . . . from the social make-up of Australian cities to the myths and images juggled by the advertising agencies to the most profound conflicts within Australian culture . . . It is impossible

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290 For further discussion see, Norma Grieve & Ailsa Burns, Australian Women: New Feminist Perspectives (Melbourne: OUP, 1986) and Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought (Melbourne: OUP, 1994).

291 Statistically while women make up 46 per cent of the workforce, only 3 per cent of the top managers in business in Australia are women, and it appears currently that the number is declining. SMH, November 29, 1997, Employment, p. 1. McGregor notes how women in the workforce are subject to more downward pressure than men because of the historic subordination of women in patriarchal society and sexism they encounter inside and outside career occupations, in Class, p. 44.

292 Utilising discourse analysis, Barbara Field concludes that many aspects of the Anglican Church both reflect and maintain men's dominance and women's powerlessness and marginality. Patriarchal discourse, which positions women as subordinate or invisible, has long been dominant in most churches. It is often reinforced by essentialist discourse that assumes there are innate differences between men and women in personality and in capacity for leadership, as well as physiological appearances. She further identifies that the greatest resistance to attempts to displace patriarchy comes from individuals or denominations at either the strongly 'catholic' end of the spectrum (including the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches) or at the strongly 'evangelical' end of the spectrum (including Baptists and Pentecostals). See Barbara Field 'Conflicting discourses: attitudes to the ordination of women in the Anglican Church in Australia', in Alan Black, (Ed), Religion in Australia (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991).

293 Craig McGregor, Class in Australia (Ringwood: Penguin, 1997). See also John Playford 'Who Rules Australia?' in Playford and Kirsner, pp. 115-119.

> to live in Australia without coming to realise that the different social classes have different sorts of jobs, live in different suburbs, go to different schools, get different incomes, speak in different ways, experience crucial differences in privilege and inequality, indeed *live different lives.*[294]

McGregor refers to a wide range of social surveys to indicate how the perception of Australia as the most middle-class society in the world is sustained,[295] noting that the class nature of society in Australia is disguised by a comparatively high standard of living, a media reinforced conservative hegemony and 'a national ethos which seems to combine hedonism with social consensus'.[296]

After considering Marxist and Weberian class schemas McGregor identifies the basic determinants of class to be a cluster of factors: occupation, power, wealth, education, family background and culture.[297]

McGregor argues that each class group has its own culture, with its own rituals, values, celebrations, icons and traditions, observed with enough commonality to be able to identify, for example, a 'working class culture'. Class is not 'an abstract, objective quality; it has to do with the lived experience of people'.[298] McGregor's analysis of these lived experiences is useful for our discussion.

Integral to class consciousness is the 'suburbanity of Australian life and the growth of a privatised lifestyle centred around the family and home'. 'Suburbia' is the heartland of the dominant middle class.[299] The most potent symbol of status is the

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294 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

295 Ibid., pp. 15-16, 24.

296 Ibid., p.19.

297 Ibid., p.30; Note also the conclusion of Geert Hofstede : 'Inequality within a society is visible in the existence of different social classes : upper, middle, and lower, or however one wants to divide them - this varies from country to country. Classes differ in their access to and their opportunities for benefiting from the advantages of society. one of them being education. A higher education automatically makes one at least middle class, p. 28.

298 Ibid., p. 43.

299 McGregor notes '. . . the middle class seems to have a persistent drawing power in terms of ethos, image and lifestyle. At its centre is the home, classically a bungalow with its front garden and backyard in which the middle class lives, dreams, procreates, raises children, and enacts a ritual of work/sleep/sex/love/kids/family/death which is at the very heart of the Australian dream.' Ibid., pp. 141-142; see also pp. 143-144 for a description of 'suburbia'.

home.[300] Consumerism and the purchasing of possessions aś a way of defining one's status and class is of high significance.[301]

So too for the 'working class'. Housing type, in particular public housing, and the suburbs with a high number of public housing dwellings, are indicators of low socio-economic status, for example Woolloomooloo, Redfern, Glebe, and Mount Druitt, to name the most prominent in Sydney. Statistically 'working class people' in general earn less than other groups, own less, have a poorer education, have less access to the goods of the society they live in, and have less opportunity for a good life.'[302]

As the most dominant class numerically, it is not surprising that middle class values affect the institutions of this country, more so than lower class values, primarily because the people who control the institutions usually belong to the middle class and serve the interests of the upper class.[303]

While Australia does not have a formal inheritance-based aristocracy in the British sense, there is, McGregor argues, a distinguishable class of owners and employers and their families who dominate Australian society 'through the concentration of economic power which is typical of any capitalist society and through the exercise of hegemonic cultural/social power'.[304] Similar to other 'upper' class groups in parallel western societies, this group is dependent upon the ownership of property and cultural capital in order to impose its own interests and ideology upon the life of the nation. McGregor notes this class dominates Australian business, one of the most highly oligopolised and monopolised in the

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Hugh Mackay notes however how the middle class is shrinking with the gap between the upper and working classes getting bigger. See Mackay, Reinventing, pp. 138ff.

300 McGregor, p. 144. Note 67 per cent of people in Australia own their own home. In Britain one third of housing is 'public', in Australia 11 per cent is 'public'. The current conservative Federal government continues to cut funds for public housing stock. See also p.196.

301 Ibid., see discussion pp. 68ff.

302 Ibid., p.186. An analysis in 1978 revealed that the top 5 percent of Australians owned more than the bottom 90 percent of the population put together. The top 10 percent own nearly 60 percent of the wealth. See p. 195

303 See Hofstede, p. 29.

304 McGregor, p. 232; McGregor draws a distinction with Britain's 'ruling class' and Australia's governing class. See p. 234.

world.[305] As the deregulation of Australia's financial system in the 1980s combines with the economic rationalist ideology of the current conservative Federal government, the immense power of this class has been enhanced as more power has been shifted from the public (government) sphere to the private sphere.[306] Although the smallest of the class groups the upper class wields the most institutional and organisational power in the country.

McGregor also identifies an 'under class' in Australia which he defines as a 'permanently and chronically disadvantaged group . . . a terribly distressed stratum of the [long-term] unemployed, the sick, the homeless, the mentally disturbed and poverty stricken . . . typically Aboriginal, ethnic or poor white', who are found in the inner city or the outer-suburban public housing estates.[307] As the term suggests, these are a group of people 'at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, a virtually dispossessed group of outcasts who not only have been discarded by society, but who, in turn, sometimes discard that society (and values)'.[308]

McGregor notes the work of Ann Daniel and others on occupational prestige in Australia. In a scale of 162 occupations by workforce sectors, in which occupations were ranked from one (at the top) to seven (at the bottom), the top five in order were judge, cabinet minister, medical specialist, barrister, church leader while the bottom five were cleaner, massage parlour operator, garbage collector, street sweeper and prostitute.[309] Power relationships are most visible within the hierarchy of occupations, where it is clear that as one moves down this

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305 Ibid., p. 233.

306 Ibid. See also pp. 235 -236 for details of recent government policies that have enhanced the private sector and down-sized the public sector. The United Nations Human Development Report for 1992 indicated that income inequality was higher in Australia than in any other country. See p. 268.

307 Ibid., p. 261.

308 Ibid., p. 262.

309 Ibid., pp. 245-249.

hierarchy there is less power over others, as well as over one's own life choices, [310] including access to education.[311]

In order to explain the existence of class in Australian contemporary society, McGregor draws on the concepts of hegemony and commonsense as developed by Antonio Gramsci.[312] Prevailing consciousness, he argues, is reflective of the subtle but prevailing forms of ideological control and manipulation that maintain the current inequalities and power elite in Australian society.

> This means, in practice, the formalising of the dominance of the most powerful groups and interests in society; in Australia it means the dominance of an extremely small powerful class of owners, managers and their allies - the power bloc - over other groups. This dominance is not conspiratorial or covert; there is no need for a conspiracy theory; it is quite open. So are the forms of cultural persuasion and manipulation which are used.[313]

Hegemonic control commences with cultural conditioning firstly through the family and then through the schools, and through many other powerful institutions. McGregor identifies these as the church, the monarchy (although this may be in decline with the republican movement), the armed forces and police, both of which have been used in Australia to break strikes and other protests, the judiciary 'which has a key function in upholding and enforcing the existing order *as it is*[314] and business organisations as well as other familiar symbols like flag and anthem.[315]

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310 Ibid., pp. 33-34.

311 Ibid., pp. 39-40. McGregor notes in relationship to social mobility in Australia: 'There is of course nothing like equality of opportunity . . . any more than there is in comparable societies in the rest of the world. Minority groups, such as Aborigines and migrants, are characteristically disadvantaged. So are women'. p. 61.

312 Ibid., p. 278. By hegemony Gramsci meant: 'the permeation through civil society - including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches, and the family - of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality . . . that is one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interest that dominate it. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an "organising principle", or world view . . . that is diffused by agencies of ideological control and socialisation into every area of daily life.' Carl Boggs, Gramsci's Marxism (London: Pluto Press, 1980), p. 39, quoted in Ibid., p. 278.

313 Ibid., p. 279.

314 Ibid., p. 285 .(italics McGregor's).

315 Ibid. In Australia there are only three owners of media, Packer, Fairfax and Murdoch. Australia has little equivalent of a paper like the Guardian that may reflect a more 'left wing' analysis.

Despite the controversy McGregor's work has elicited from the very hegemonic forces he has identified, this analysis of class in contemporary Australia reveals a society where social location is clearly identifiable, and is particularly enmeshed with property ownership and occupational power. The lived experience of being in the working or underclass has a direct influence on the way in which people from this social location understand the world in which they live and accept the 'way things are'. The same conclusion can be drawn for those who exist in the middle and upper classes. This reality will surface in our analysis of the way in which ordinary readers read the Lukan text.[316]

The Sydney Context: An Ecclesial and Hermeneutic Perspective.

While the Sydney context is shaped by the characteristics, myths and ideologies of the broader Australian context, unique characteristics in this context require further discussion. From these unique characteristics has emerged a polarised ecclesiological and theological world, with a dominant conservative evangelical emphasis.

As previously noted, Stuart Piggin identifies 'evangelicalism' as the most influential 'theology' within the context of Sydney, a combination of Reformation, English Puritan, Continental pietism and eighteenth century northern hemisphere theology.[317] To this must be added American revivalism and fundamentalism.

Piggin identifies how from the early days of colonial life, evangelicalism embraced the liberal ideals of harmonious social progress, religious and political liberty for all, a capitalist economy and an educated united common citizenship 'with a representative government in a beneficent state'[318]. Essentially this meant that:

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316 McGregor suggests that resistance to the class system in Australia can be identified in emerging sub-culture and popular culture, and also in the enduring 'feeling' of egalitarianism even though it does not exist in reality. See discussion Ibid., pp. 290-294.

317 Piggin, Evangelical, p. vii.

318 Ibid., p. 24.

'Liberals, capitalists, and evangelicals tended to share the same core values' and identify the same enemies.[319] One could argue that such a relationship still exists.

The present character of Sydney evangelicalism - 'clergy-led and concerned with church first and the community second'[320] - was established as early as the 1850s with the theology of Bishop Barker and the opening of Moore Theological College (the present training college for the Anglican Diocese of Sydney), and cemented by the work of Nathanial Jones, the Principal of the College from 1897 to 1911. At the heart of this theological position was the premise that the Bible, not experience or reason, was the Christian's only and absolute authority.[321] By the turn of the twentieth century, evangelicals in Sydney had come to identify themselves as either conservative or liberal, the former the dominant position within the Anglican and Baptist churches, while the Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians were more a mixture of both.[322] The conservative position was a reactive theology identifying secularism, materialism, ritualism, Darwinianism and biblical criticism as the major enemies of 'truth'. This position produced a withdrawal from secular society, and to a very large extent reflected the same theological focus expressed by C.H. Spurgeon amongst British Baptists in the 1880s. The influence of Spurgeon on conservative evangelicalism in Sydney (and Australia as a nation) through to the 1970s should not be considered irrelevant.[323]

During the first twenty-five years of the present century the influence of northern hemisphere theological movements shifted from the traditional British source. The Fundamentalist movement initiated by Warfield and Hodge between 1910 and 1915 in America expressed itself in Sydney as early as 1921, reinforcing a number of the basic tenets of conservative evangelicalism, including anti-Catholic

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319 Ibid.

320 Ibid., p.38; see also Stephen Judd & Kenneth Cable, Sydney Anglicans: A History of the Diocese (Sydney: AIO, 1987), pp. 70-71.

321 Piggin, Evangelical, pp. 37-77.

322 Ibid., pp. 50-74.

323 Ibid., p.75; see also A.C. Prior, Some Fell on Good Ground (Sydney: Baptist Union of NSW, 1966), p. 83ff.; Ken Manley, 'Shapers of our Australian Baptist Identity': A revised and expanded version of a paper given at the 'Baptists Today' conference, Canberra, September 1997 (Melbourne: Whitley College, 1998), pp. 16-18.

sentiment. It particularly reinforced the conservative decision to abandon social reform in favour of evangelism. The 'social gospel' of Walter Rauschenbusch was rejected.[324] An almost exclusive emphasis on the transformation of the individual and a rejection of the 'world' dominated ecclesiological thought and practice, and was responsible amongst Anglicans in particular for the development of two separate 'holiness' cults.[325] Within the Baptist denomination pre-millenarian approaches reinforced this 'holiness', dismissing any other role for the church in the world other than evangelism.[326]

The 'trial' of Samuel Angus, the Presbyterian Professor of New Testament at St Andrew's College, University of Sydney, well illustrates how conservative forces in Sydney resisted all who did not fit with their doctrines.[327] The 1993-94 'trial' of Rev. Dr. Peter Cameron, Principal of St. Andrew's College in Sydney University, by the Presbyterian Presbytery of Sydney, confirmed the ascendancy of reformed theology in the Presbyterian Church of Australia. Following a sermon preached at the Ashfield Presbyterian Church in 1993, Cameron was charged, and found guilty of teaching contrary to the church's doctrine of Scripture, by both the Sydney Presbytery and the New South Wales Assembly. It was not only his support for the ordination of women that led to the charge, but more particularly his suggestion that Paul's exclusion of women was intentional and in this matter Paul

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324 In part reaction to the 'social gospel' was the development of a 'prosperity gospel' claiming that material blessings from God are the result of faithfulness to the Judeo-Christian ethic. Mostly popularised in Pentecostal churches, this approach has surfaced amongst conservative Baptists in the work of Dr. Les Kemeny, a nuclear physicist : for example The New South Wales Baptist Autumn & Winter editions 1996, pp. 12-15 & 16-17 respectively.

325 Piggin notes: 'Evangelicalism was now saddled with the negative overtones of fundamentalism: obscurantism, anti-intellectualism, intolerance, pietism and separatism', and a preoccupation with Biblical inspiration, dispensationalism and premillennialism. In Evangelical, p.80 & p. 96; also pp. 105-109; see also Manley, p.19; David Parker 'Fundamentalism and Conservative Protestantism in Australia 1920-1980', University of Queensland PhD thesis, 1982, pp. 465-504; and David Millikan, Imperfect Company: Power and Control in an Australian Christian Cult (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1991).

326 Manley, p. 21.

327 Parker, pp. 255-287; Piggin notes, 'The forces of Sydney evangelical Anglicanism, deftly marshalled by the conservative evangelical triumvirate of D.J. Knox, R.B. Robinson, and H.S. Begbie, responded to Angus by deposing the liberal evangelicals in their own church. The Baptist response to Angus was led by G.H. Morling, for forty years principal of the Baptist Theological College. . . . [who] affirmed that the college's policy was 'one of sound evangelical teaching as opposed to modern theological conceptions', an anti-intellectualism that Piggin suggests protected Baptists from the 'threat' of Modernism. See Evangelical, pp. 92-97.

was wrong. This was identified as a fundamental attack upon the inerrancy of Scripture.[328]

The reaction of T.C. Hammond, a Protestant from Northern Ireland and Principal of Moore College,[329] to Karl Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans which appeared in 1933 brought about a resurgence in Calvinist doctrine, and led to the combination of the current conservative reformed evangelical position that is apparent in both Anglican and Baptist denominations in Sydney, and some smaller denominations like the Continuing Presbyterian Church.[330] The influence of this theological position has been enormous. [331]

It was through Moore Theological College that Reformed theology was to have its greatest impact, commencing with the long principalship of Broughton Knox (1959-1985). An analysis of Knox's 'hermeneutic' provides a basis for understanding the dominant contemporary approach to 'reading' Scripture in Sydney. For Knox the Bible was the sole authority in all matters of faith and doctrine, self-authenticating, and only doctrines found in the Bible were to be taught as essential to salvation. In a 1960 article entitled 'Propositional Revelation the Only Revelation', Knox argued that the 'Word of God' is God's revelation not through a series of events or acts, but in words, or propositions formed by those words. Events or actions are not revelatory, and only become so when 'interpreted by God' through words alone.

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328 See David Burke & Philip J. Hughes, The Presbyterians in Australia (Canberra: AGPS, 1996), pp. 13-14.

329 Hammond apparently proclaimed 'it would be dangerous to allow so stout an opponent to remain unassailed in our rear!' ; quoted in Ibid., p.135. The influence of T.C. Hammond on theological education in Protestant circles in Sydney was substantial. The author's first year of theological education at Morling College included an introductory course in theology where T.C Hammond's In Understanding Be Men was the major text. It still appears on reading lists at the College today.

330 In chapter 8 of his study, dealing with the years 1960-1994, Piggin discusses in detail what he calls the 'ascendancy of reformed theology', which he notes 'stands for an uncompromising allegiance to historic Calvinism', and is part of a world -wide phenomenon; see Piggin, Evangelical, pp. 180-188.

331 This influence led to division amongst Baptists in 1968 supporting the second Billy Graham crusade, some declaring him too liberal, the withdrawal of Melbourne Baptists in 1975 from the United Faculty of Theology due to Catholic presence, and in 1988 the withdrawal of Sydney Baptists from the Sydney College of Divinity, a consortium of colleges which included Catholics and Orthodox traditions, in order to join the Australian College of Theology, of which the Sydney Anglican diocese is the dominant member. This concluded a decade of controversy over the question of biblical inerrancy amongst New South Wales Baptists. Ibid .; see also Parker, pp. 324-339.

These words were contained exclusively in the Biblical text, words by definition inerrant. This in turn led to a primacy of the 'word' and a denigration of the significance of events and actions. It followed that the primary work of the ministry 'was to teach the Bible where alone God reveals himself; the chief work of the theologian was to defend the inerrancy of Scripture; and the chief glory of the believer was to hear and learn the Scriptures. *This emphasis has fashioned Sydney Anglicanism more than any other single influence.*'[332]

Knox's ecclesiology has also been influential, understanding the 'local church' rather than the denomination, as the truest manifestation of 'heavenly reality', an understanding supported by Donald Robinson, who joined the faculty of Moore College in 1952, and who was Archbishop of Sydney from 1982-1993. The Knox-Robinson approach reinforced the dominance of a low church evangelical reformed ecclesiology. [333]

David Hilliard has examined the decade of the 1960s in Australia, identifying it as a period of sudden and unexpected religious upheaval, as indeed it was in Europe and North America.[334] An essential ingredient shaping our current culture and Protestant theology during and following on from this decade has been Americanisation - the massive American influence at all levels of both secular and theological consciousness. Links between the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist Union of New South Wales have been forged and cemented through numerous exchanges of pastors, missions and Southern Baptist funded programs. The influence of American revivalism is also influential amongst the resurgent conservative fundamentalist churches.[335]

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332 Piggin, Evangelical, p.185 (italics mine); Piggin goes on to conclude: 'This affected the view of God held by Sydney Anglicans. God does not have to intervene in human affairs because he has left his Word (a la the clockmaker) as a guide for daily living.' p. 187.

333 Robinson continued to argue the local church was at the centre of the church's work, with the denominational structures but its servants, and commenced a campaign called 'making Sunday work', as an opportunity for Christians to withdraw from the world. This in turn led to a concern for the 'pure' church. See Ibid., p187; also William James Lawton, The Better Time To Be (Kensington: NSWUP, 1990).

334 David Hilliard, 'The Religious Crisis of the 1960s: The Experience of the Australian Churches', Journal of Religious History 21.2, 1997, pp. 209-227.

335 Manley, pp. 18-27.

In 1975 Philip Jensen, the rector of Saint Matthais Paddington, commenced work at Sydney University with Campus Bible Study.[336] Today Jensen, the brother of the current principal of Moore Theological College, and his Bible study groups monopolise all the Universities in New South Wales, with an aggressive evangelical fundamentalist theology. Through St. Matthais Press, Jensen markets an anti-catholic, anti-charismatic, anti-women in ministry, fundamentalist approach, identifying two orders of ministry.[337] The first order is the proclamation of the word. The second order is social concern or caring for the needs of people. The latter is often identified as a distraction to the real purpose of the church, which is to 'preach the gospel'. Jensen was also a founding member of the Reformed Evangelical Protestant Association (REPA), established in 1992 in response to the debate regarding the ordination of women, and as stated in the original REPA brochure, to remedy the malaise which had come over the church's evangelistic outreach, and to allow the Gospel to do its work of 'framing, shaping and changing our society'. [338]

A summary contemporary Anglican hermeneutic is provided by Philip Jensen:

> '. . . agreement on the divine origin and authority of Scripture is a crucial point in an age when many Christians have been prepared to accord the Bible only a reduced, even human-only status. . . . submission to Jesus as Lord brings with it submission to a covenantal book which we must call the Word of God.'[339]. . . because Jesus is God's Word . . . the Bible is the complete and sufficient revelation of God for our time. The faith has once for all been delivered to God's people (Jude 3), *and the practice of adding to the Bible contemporary or even traditional 'revelations' or interpretations, however exciting,*

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336 Piggin, Evangelical., p.190.

337 These issues surface repeatedly in The Briefing, a twice monthly periodical distributed widely in Sydney. Note the edition 178, 7 May, 1996, which attacks the work of Piggin, Evangelical, as both historically and biblically flawed, identifying Piggin as a 'liberal evangelical', pp. 3-10.

338 Piggin, Evangelical., pp. 211-212. REPA produced a Bible studies series in 1993 entitled 'The Essentials', which were made available to Sydney parishes. The studies identified the ' Essentials' as Christian and Anglican; Grace Alone; Christ Alone; Scripture Alone; and Faith Alone. The study on Scripture Alone, asserts that 'Christ can only be found through the Scriptures' and that reason and experience mislead if they have a place in the interpretive process.

339 Peter Jensen, At The Heart of the Universe (Homebush West, ANZEA, 1991), p. 80.

however venerable, serves only to diminish Scripture; because it diminishes Christ who is God's great Word to men and women.' [340]

Significant also for the Sydney scene was the development and growth of the Festival of Light under the leadership of Fred Nile, who came initially from the Revesby Evangelical Congregational Church of the Puritan Heritage. A morals campaigner of a highly conservative order, Nile was to move into State politics with the Call to Australia Party in 1981, and has remained in the Upper House of the New South Wales parliament ever since. His approach is not unlike that of the American right, anti-gay, anti-feminist, anti-pornography, particularly attempting to legislate public morals.[341]

A major historical contribution to the polarisation of theological positions that exists in Sydney today emerged with the formation of the Uniting Church of Australia, firstly with the Methodists and Congregationalists in 1972 and then the Presbyterians in 1974. The formal union of these churches took place in June 1977, with the endorsement of the document Basis of Union.[342] This Basis of Union identified the theological distinctives of the Uniting Church including its approach to the interpretation of Scripture. In section 5 'The Biblical Witness' it acknowledges that ' . . . the church has received the books of the Old and New Testament as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated'.[343] Section 11 'Scholarly Interpreters' acknowledges a tradition of scholarship in the interpretation of the Bible and, 'the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific inquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an

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340 Ibid., p. 83. (italics mine).

341 Ibid., pp. 190-193.

342 The Uniting Church in Australia, Basis of Union (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1992 ed.); see also Dutney Manifesto for Renewal : The Shaping of a New Church (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986).

343 Ibid., p.8.

informed faith', concluding that the church 'will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought'.[344]

The basis of union also identifies both women and men as 'Ministers of the Word', a most significant recognition of equality for women in the church world in Sydney. This embracing of modern scholarship and contemporary thought and the recognition of its importance for biblical interpretation and the ongoing development of theology was significant and elevated academic inquiry in the doctrinal statement of a church to a new position.[345] Reaction to this ecclesiological and theological statement from conservative evangelical denominations was fierce.

In 1979 The Baptist Union of Churches in New South Wales (of which the author is currently an ordained minister) adopted a series of resolutions following discussion of a paper 'The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture', at its 111th Annual Assembly. The resolutions adopted the principle of the verbal inspiration of Scripture as the official Baptist position, amending previously agreed to Statements of Belief, and instructing faculty to teach the same at the Baptist Theological College. The resolutions are still current today and as such are the official position of the Baptist church on how one should read and interpret Scripture.

> Those who hold the principle of "Verbal Inspiration" believe that the Holy Spirit so controlled the human agent that he wrote the words that exactly expressed what God wanted said yet in the person's own thought-forms and literary style. The Spirit exercised a function of superintendence and guidance so that the Scriptures were preserved from all forms of error.[346]

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344 Ibid., p.10.

345 Dutney, Manifesto, pp. 103-107.

346 'The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture', Baptist Union of New South Wales Yearbook 1979-1980, (Glebe: BUNSW, 1980), p.47. The report continues to define verbal inspiration utilising the work of Harold Lindsell, noting the 'authors of Scripture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit were preserved from making factual, historical, scientific and other errors' concluding that the original documents were free of error in any way.

With this premise the report establishes the acceptable process for the interpretation of Scripture under the four headings 'simplicity', 'harmony', 'history' and 'spiritual'. Identifying the first principle of interpreting Scripture as the 'principle of simplicity', this in turn defined by quoting John Stott quoting John Calvin as: 'the true meaning of Scripture is the **natural** and obvious meaning'.[347] This natural and obvious meaning is established by the interpreter through 'some knowledge' of the grammar, syntax, idiomatic expressions and 'figures of speech' used in the 'language in which the text was first written- and the language into which the text is translated'. The interpreter is therefore encouraged to use commentaries and Bible dictionaries with the proviso that every statement be checked 'by the Scriptures themselves'.[348]

The second and most important principle, establishes that the interpreter must 'look for agreement within Scripture rather than contradictions, harmony rather than discord. So we shall seek to interpret the text in its context and each Scripture in light of all'. Essentially this is understood to be the interpretation of Scripture by Scripture.

Quoting again the work of John Stott the third principle is identified as the principle of history and is explained as follows: 'This means that we must rid our minds of twentieth century ideas and think ourselves back into the original situation in which the Biblical authors wrote. What did they intend to say in that context and by those words?' This is shortened to the rule 'a text means what its author meant'.[349]

The fourth principle stresses that interpretation must not be 'private' but must be 'given' by the Holy Spirit. This introduces the right of the individual to interpret Scripture under such guidance, as opposed to the idea of church tradition. The individual's own interpretation is that which ' must decide the answer', although

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347 Ibid., p.51. (bold the Report's).
348 Ibid.
349 Ibid., pp. 51-52.

there is a short warning that this individualistic approach should not be taken too far outside the church community's collective interpretation.[350]

In summary, the contemporary position on the interpretation of the biblical story amongst Protestant conservative Baptist evangelicals is firmly rooted in an objective, historical-critical, pietistic individualistic approach. This is reflective of the Anglican diocese position with the exception that Anglicans add doctrine as a key element in the interpretation of Scripture. It is within this official 'hermeneutic' context that the author has undertaken this particular research. Unique also is the 'Statement of Beliefs' adopted in the same year by the Baptist Union of New South Wales.[351]

Of further significance for this analysis are the theological positions developed in response to the question of the recognition of women in ministry, and women's ordination, in both the Anglican and Baptist denominations.

On 23 December 1991 Owen Dowling, Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulbourn, announced that he intended to ordain eleven women as priests on 2 February 1992. This led to a public battle in the secular courts of New South Wales and to acrimonious debate between those in the Sydney Diocese opposed to the ordination of women, and those from other diocese who were not.[352]

Archbishop Robinson's position on the issue is representative of the majority of members of the Sydney Diocese. Piggin summarises his position as follows.

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350 Ibid., p.52.

351 See also Philip J. Hughes, The Baptists in Australia, (Canberra: AGPS, 1996), pp. 21-28; also Parker, pp. 324-339.

352 Piggin, Evangelical, pp. 203ff. Dowling's response to the injunction preventing him from proceeding with the ordination has become somewhat famous and quoted world-wide:'. . . the outlook and attitudes of the controlling faction in the Diocese of Sydney, the most conservative diocese in the whole of the world-wide Anglican communion . . . who turn questionable tradition into immutable law'.

> Robinson believes that the all-male priesthood is an essential part, not of the Gospel, but of the apostolic tradition (*paradosis*), of which the Gospel is but part. This apostolic tradition has three major strands: the Gospel (e.g. I Corinthians 15. 1ff.); teaching on moral conduct (e.g. I Thessalonians 4. 1-8); and teaching on church order or conduct in the congregation. The proposal to ordain women violates the last, but any violation of the apostolic tradition is unacceptable because it is a violation of Scripture to obey which Anglicans are committed by their constitution as a church. This commitment is the "only way we have of submitting to the authority of Christ over the Church".[353]

Central is a theology of male leadership or headship compounded by the popular prejudice that women are inferior to men. In response to the ordination of women in the Diocese of Perth, a prominent Sydney Anglican on Good Friday 1992 publicly called for the Sydney Diocese to secede from the Anglican Church in Australia because of 'the drift away from biblical authority'.[354]

On 11 November 1992 all three houses of the General Synod of the Church of England, in England, agreed on the ordination of women.[355] Ten days later the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia met in Sydney. The Synod resolved by just two votes to ordain women.[356] The Anglican Diocese of Sydney however still has no women priests.

Both in Australia and in Sydney evangelicals are no longer a monochrome group. Divisions over the role of women, the Charismatic movement, social justice, even creation and evolution are very apparent today. Piggin correctly identifies the source of this division: 'The issue was [*and still is*] the interpretation and application of Scripture . . . Differences, then, between evangelicals are to be attributed to differences in exegesis (the understanding of Scripture in its original context) and in hermeneutics (the way the results of the exegesis are to be applied to today's world).'[357]

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353 Ibid., p.207.
354 Ibid., p.214.
355 Ibid., pp. 218-219.
356 Ibid., p.220.
357 Ibid., p.215.

But these differences are also at the heart of the theological polarisation in Sydney between evangelicals and those who prefer to be identified as non-evangelicals. At a 1995 Symposium titled 'Can Theology Be Done In Sydney?', four papers were offered by faculty of member Colleges of the Sydney College of Divinity.[358] Andrew Murray in his introduction notes in Sydney historically the practice of theology has been both fragmented and under-nourished within denominations, between denominations, and in relation to the city itself.

The depth of the theological divide however is expressed forcefully in these papers. Colleen O'Reilly, albeit humorously, creates a scenario in the year 2095 where the faculty of Moore College are skating endlessly in hell which has frozen over, 'just as they said it would be before real ecumenical theology flourished in Sydney.'[359] Her comments however are more serious. 'If theology is possible in Sydney it must be a theology which accepts the past, with its motivations and limitations, and which is willing to make a commitment to a new engagement with both the specific context of Sydney and the wider search for meanings in Australian cultures. Theology is now firmly an international task yet it is always local and particular.'[360] She suggests that the doing of theology in Sydney needs to overcome the distance between those who are intimidated by classical theology and those who are sceptical about the value of life issues, concluding that the integration of action and reflection is the key to 'doing theology'.[361]

Further she identifies that 'doing theology from the experience of female embodiment is both significantly like and significantly different from doing theology within male embodiment. She notes that presently the voices of women in theology, especially married women faculty members, are few, muted and largely unmissed. Although teaching at the Uniting Church Theological College, she notes

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358 As noted above the Baptist Union of Churches in New South Wales withdrew from the Sydney College of Divinity in 1988 and joined the Australian College of Theology with the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.

359 Colleen O'Reilly, 'Is Theology Possible In Sydney? Four Scenes: Sydney 2095', in Murray, Can Theology Be Done in Sydney, p.5.

360 Ibid., p.6.

361 Ibid., p.6.

as a member of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney: 'As one from a church which, in Sydney, will not yet countenance a woman holding a teaching office, I am acutely aware of how impossible it can be to do theology in Sydney.'[362]

Chris Mostert also comments in his paper 'Can Theology Be Done In Sydney?' that 'the simplistic appeal to Scripture, coupled with an equally insistent appeal to certain "Confessions" and "Articles" of the 16th and 17th century, and reinforced by the solid conviction that even most other Anglicans have got it all wrong, has been most *damaging* to theology. At the very least it has been impoverishing to us all . . .',[363] concluding '. . . it has been a great disappointment to me that Sydney - in so many respects in the forefront of things in Australia - must be regarded in the field of theological inquiry (open and ecumenical) as forming the rearguard'.[364]

The challenge for theology in Sydney remains the development of a hermeneutic that is relevant and responsible. Disagreement over hermeneutical principles has been as divisive as any other factor, and is at the heart of current divisions. At the time of writing, following the Annual Assembly Meetings of the Baptist Union of New South Wales that saw an agreement reached whereby women will be able to be ordained and accredited for ministry, (an historical step forward), the establishment of the Conservative Evangelical Baptist Fellowship has been publicly announced. Amongst its working objectives are 'the return of the Baptist Union to a firmly biblical position' and 'the principal of Sola Scriptura', a rejection both of unbiblical ecumenism and the practice of social concern 'apart from a biblical basis'.[365]

In conclusion this analysis of the Sydney 'theological world' has largely reflected upon the dominating role of Sydney evangelicals, especially in the Anglican and

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362 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
363 Chris Mostert, 'Can Theology be Done In Sydney?', in Murray, p.12.
364 Ibid., p.13.
365 Conservative Evangelical Baptist Fellowship Brochure, January 1998.

Baptist traditions.[366] It is this 'theological world' within which the author of this thesis has lived. But it has not been overwhelmingly dominating. Alternative expressions of theology have emerged in a variety of movements, for example, the 'radical discipleship' movement of the 1970s and 1980s that sought to embrace engagement with political and economic life, advocacy for the poor and marginalised, social justice and alternative expressions of worship and the practice of faith in the world[367]. It is the heritage of these alternative movements, and the particular inner city context of Sydney, that have shaped and informed the author's interest in readings by marginalised and disadvantaged ordinary readers, a particular context in Sydney to which we now turn.

The Inner City of Sydney

Social Indicators

In one of the most highly urbanised countries in the world, the largest city in Australia is Sydney.[368] From the post-war era until the early 1990s, population growth has been accommodated in new suburbs rather than by intensification of established areas. Urban sprawl, until recently, has been facilitated by modern transport technology, which has made outer suburban residential development possible. The lower price of outer suburban housing has enhanced the accessibility of the 'Great Australian Dream' - a house on a large block of land - resulting in one of the lowest density metropolitan areas in the world.[369]

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366 Manley notes that a Sydney Baptist looks more like a Sydney Anglican than any other Baptist or even Protestant in Australia; p.15. However others would argue that it would be truer to say a Sydney Anglican looks more like a Baptist than any other Anglican in Australia.

367 The story of alternative Christian Communities in Australia has yet to be documented or told in any detail; See Manley, pp. 25-26.

368 Sixty-three per cent of all Australians lived in state and territory capital cities in 1994. In 1994 Sydney had a population of 3.7 million people, and is currently ranked 57th of all cities in terms of population size. W. MacLennan, Australian Social Trends (Canberra: ABS: 1996), p. 23.

369 K. McCracken 'Sydney - A Demographic Profile', Geography Bulletin, Summer, 1990 pp. 11-31; Sydney's urban sprawl is reflected in statistics regarding housing stock and type. In 1994 only 20 per cent of the total housing stock were flats, apartments or units. 80 per cent were separate houses. See MacLennan, Australian Social Trends 1996, p.26.

By 1993, after half a decade of population decline in the inner city, revitalisation of the inner city core had commenced.[370] The most significant social factor arising from this development is the provision of highly expensive inner city housing, side by side with public housing estates traditionally for the 'poor'. It is within the public housing estates of Woolloomooloo and Glebe that the author's life experience and work has been shaped over the past twelve years. These estates are part of an inner city context that includes the suburbs of Kings Cross, Redfern, Surry Hills and Darlinghurst. With the exception of Glebe all other suburbs are located within the South Sydney Council area. Glebe is located within the Leichardt City Council local government area. Space does not allow for in depth analysis of all six inner city suburbs. However an analysis of the South Sydney Council area in general, and the suburb of Woolloomooloo in particular will provide a clear identification of the social, economic, political and cultural location of ordinary readers engaged in this study, as well as that of the author.

In August 1995 a Report of the South Sydney Public Housing Taskforce was published under the title Who Cares? We Care![371] The Foreword, by the Mayor of the Council read as follows:

> Public housing estates in South Sydney have been in a state of crisis for a very long time. Events like the Clisdell Street shootings, the Wellington Street firebombing and countless break-ins and assaults have only served to highlight the multitude of problems and stresses faced by public housing tenants in South Sydney on a daily basis.[372]

The 1991 Census of Population and Housing indicated nearly seventeen percent of all private dwellings in South Sydney were rented from the Department of Housing. This is substantially higher than the figure for both the Inner City circle

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370 McCracken, p.18. The SMH, Saturday July 13, 1996, p.7 lists twenty-eight high-rise private apartment developments being built in the inner city core - a total of 5210 apartments of varying sizes. The report noted: 'More than 2,200 (apartments) will be built in the next two years in the CBD, with a further 4000 planned to be finished by the 2000 Olympics. In the CBD the residential population is set to increase from 7,000 to more than 20,000 early next century.'

371 South Sydney Public Housing Taskforce, Who Cares? We Care! (Zetland : South Sydney City Council, 1995).

168 Ibid., p. 6.

(six percent) and the outer metropolitan region (seven percent).[373] The 1991 Census ranks South Sydney as the most disadvantaged Local Government Authority in the state of New South Wales. Redfern, Waterloo and Woolloomooloo are named as localities of particular disadvantage, characterised by high unemployment, low income and high (public) rented accommodation.

In Woolloomooloo public housing stock totals forty-two point seven percent of total housing, concentrated in an area less than one square kilometre, representing a specific pocket of disadvantage. In Redfern twenty-two percent of total housing is public housing, while in Surry Hills public housing is sixteen percent of the total.[374] The 1991 Census indicates the South Sydney local government area is experiencing the highest level of housing stress in the region with ten percent of households experiencing housing stress.[375] Housing in South Sydney is becoming increasingly less affordable in terms of both rental and owner occupied opportunities.

As noted above the inner city is currently experiencing a housing 'boom', predominantly by large-scale developers assisted by the State Government's urban consolidation policies, and the rezoning of large tracts of under-utilised industrial land by Council. This process is having a major impact on both social structure and housing opportunities, including escalating rents and purchase prices' increasing housing stress within the city.

The South Sydney community, in the main, has been traditionally working class and made up of a wide variety of different cultural groups. Whilst social change may be considered inevitable, the magnitude and the rate of change being experienced in South Sydney threatens to increase dramatically the dislocation

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373 Ibid., p. 11.

374 Source : Public Housing Dwellings in South Sydney by Postcode, Department of Housing, in Ibid., p. 13.

375 Housing affordability/housing stress is clearly a significant predictor of demand for social housing with the most commonly used affordability measure being the ratio of housing costs to income. Ibid., pp. 21-22.

and marginalisation of public housing tenants in the community. A more polarised community is leading to social divisions based on income and housing type. As one resident remarked: 'In some ways it's easier when we're all poor together'.[376]

Three particular groups within the area have been identified as requiring special attention: those suffering from mental illness, those with HIV/AIDS and Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders.[377]

The most recent study of homeless people in this area indicated that seventy-five percent of homeless people are suffering from schizophrenia, alcohol use disorders, drug use disorders and mood and anxiety disorders. It is estimated that up to five to six thousand homeless people exist within this location. As one of the most deprived groups in the community, the prevalence of a high percentage with mental illness has further impact upon the area.[378] Of the total number of people with HIV/AIDS in NSW, fifty-six percent live in the South Sydney Council area. Nine percent of people have tested seropositive for Hepatitis B or C, compared to one percent of the total population. Housing and cultural dislocation is also a major problem within the Aboriginal community in South Sydney. The area has the second highest metropolitan concentration of Indigenous people, with the majority of Aboriginal people residing in Redfern, La Perouse and Woolloomooloo. Compared with the general population, Aboriginal communities in this area have a higher proportion of children and young people, with a very low proportion of people over sixty-five years. With the above taken into consideration the report Who Cares? We Care! concludes the following in terms of population mix:

> Whilst there is no single or consistent population mix across the estates, they are generally characterised by high proportions of people with mental illness and psychiatric disorders, on methadone programs, who are elderly, from non-English speaking backgrounds and living alone coupled with high levels of unemployment, dependency, and low

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376 Ibid., pp. 25-26.

377 Ibid., pp. 34-37.

378 Colin Robinson, Overview of Down and Out in Sydney: The Prevalence of Mental Disorders and Related Disabilities among Homeless People in Inner Sydney (Sydney: St Vincent De Paul, Sydney City Mission, Salvation Army, Wesley Mission, Haymarket Foundation, 1998).

income status. Together these factors create a social mix which is 'unworkable'.[379]

Woolloomooloo in particular provides further social indicators identifying the area as one of disadvantage in economic, cultural and social terms. A population of 3,264 live in a 0.75 square kilometre area. 1991 Census figures indicate the general unemployment rate is twenty-five percent, with youth unemployment as high as thirty-eight percent of the employable work force. Fifty-six percent of the population do not have any formal qualifications. Twenty-two percent of families are sole parent families with a high percentage of single parents, women under seventeen years of age. Thirty-seven percent of the population live on less than $12,000.00 per annum, while forty-nine percent live on $15,000 or less. Sixty percent of families live on a social security pension. Nine percent of the population in Woolloomooloo is Indigenous (compared to three point seven percent in the South Sydney LGA and less than one percent for the Sydney region as a whole). Homelessness makes a direct impact on the area, with two large hostels and up to two hundred homeless people living under the railway overpass that runs through Woolloomooloo. Immediately adjacent to Woolloomooloo is Kings Cross, the symbolic centre in Australia for the sex entertainment industry, street and brothel prostitution, and the sale of illegal drugs and substances. Around fifty thousand visitors come to Kings Cross each month. This has a clear social impact on Woolloomooloo, especially in terms of crime and drug abuse.[380]

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378 Who Cares? We Care!, p. 7.

380 These statistics are from a variety of sources. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 1991 Census on Population and Housing; Australian Bureau of Statistics First Release Figures 1996 census on Population and Housing; NSW Department of Community Services, South East Sydney Area Integrated Community Services Strategic Plan, 1998; Ross McDonald, Urban Tracks: Exploring Woolloomooloo and Kings Cross, Sydney (Sydney: World Vision of Australia, 1998). In 1992 a research student, Joy Connor, from the University of Technology, Sydney, for a paper on the development of a Family Life Education project in Woolloomooloo, compiled the following analysis of ten families associated with the Woolloomooloo Baptist Fellowship: 'The ten families contained fourteen adults and twenty-eight children. Two families were Aboriginal, one was Vietnamese, the remainder Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic.

History of Parents:

Institutional or foster care in childhood for parents	7 out of 14 individuals
Left school at minimum age	9 out of 14 individuals
Mothers whose first child was born in their teens	7 out of 10 families
Victims of sex abuse or domestic violence	11 out of 14 individuals

Woolloomooloo's political profile is decidedly Labor Party of Australia. Its history is rich in terms of working class identities, and especially the 'battle to save the 'Loo'. This 'battle' took up much of a decade in the 1970s and maintained the availability of public housing, defeating development proposals to build privately owned high-rise apartments and offices.[381]

A Local Theology

Within this particular context of first world disadvantage and marginalisation, a number of church members in Woolloomooloo and Glebe and workers and volunteers with Baptist Inner City Ministries, including the author, have collectively attempted to articulate some theological distinctives relevant to this context. In a sense they provide a broad basis upon which one might develop an 'inner city hermeneutic' or 'local theology'. These distinctives were developed with many of the readers involved in the reading groups and finalised in mid 1997 as a document entitled 'Urban Theological Distinctives'. To a certain extent the document is a product of the reading process initiated as part of this research. This expression of 'local theology' does not claim to be complete, and is continually under review. The homiletical nature of the document represents the 'feelings' of those who comprised it. It is not a value-neutral theological statement and does not claim to be so. It is to an extent, vernacular and local and evolving.

Present Situation

Public housing tenants	10 out of 10 families
Single parent female headed families	6 out of 10 families
Employed	3 out of 14 individuals
Unstable relationships (separated in last 3 months)	3 out of 10 families
One year or more of job skill training	4 out of 14 individuals
Number of these employed	1 out of 14 individuals
Blended families	6 out of 10 families
No extended family support	5 out of 10 families

Source: J. Connor, Unpublished Paper 'Family Life Education Project for Woolloomooloo' for the degree of Masters in Community Management, UTS, 1992.

381 See Isadore Brodsky, Sydney's Little World of Woolloomooloo (Neutral Bay: Old Sydney Free Press, 1966); George Farwell, Requiem for Woolloomooloo (Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971); Shirley Fitzgerald, Sydney 1842-1992 (Sydney: Hale & Ironmonger, 1992).

The most pertinent aspects of the document representing this local theology are as follows:

Incarnational presence of ministry and workers:

'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1: 14). The story of Jesus is the story of a God who was so passionately concerned for creation that God chose to become one with humanity. This concept of incarnation - a being with, a living amongst, a 'humbling of oneself', translates in the urban context to a practice of mission that is distinct from paternalism. Incarnational ministry is the practice of one's faith **with** others, not 'to' or 'for' others. Incarnational mission means that those of us who come from the dominate middle class in our society, and who seek to be engaged with people who are on the margins of our society, must first seek to listen to, and be grounded in the inner city context, in order to practice our faith in a way that empowers others. This does not mean that those of us who come from middle class life experiences cannot engage in ministry to those outside our culture, but it does mean we must earn the right to do so in humility, and without an arrogant evangelism or paternalism. It means listening to those who live in it, and developing models of ministry with those who are there. It generally means a long term commitment to work in places where the church has been absent, or only present in the language of judgement.

Shalom - seeking the peace of the city at structural, community and individual levels of reality with the practice of justice and compassion:

The Old Testament concept of *shalom* is one that identifies a way of being that embraces all aspects of life into a state of peace and harmony, both with God, fellow humanity and creation. Such a state of harmony is however often shattered by sin that is both individual and structural. While Christians have focussed on individual sin, we have been too easily blinded to the way in which sin operates at the structural level in our world and city, where those in power legislate in the interests of the owners of industry, and those who are the 'poor and oppressed' in our society are ignored. Vicious cycles of poverty shatter the *shalom* God seeks for the city, not simply creating sin, but the 'sinned against'. Racism, sexism, exploitation of others, all continue to destroy the *shalom* that God desires. Even amongst God's people jealousy, envy, power and malice often destroy this *shalom*. In naming this need for *shalom* we seek to create it at the individual, community and structural levels of the city, through the practice of justice (including social action, advocacy and political engagement) and compassion (including mediation, forgiveness and charity).

Street level projects derived from the context and with the people:

Inner city ministry begins with the people and the mutually established needs of the context not with building based programs and projects imported from outside the context. Ministry strategy must be relevant and connected to the locality, and developed in consultation with those with whom the work will develop. Outreach work at street level in the context of the inner city of Sydney, especially amongst sex-workers and adolescents at risk, is a proactive approach to meet those who would

never feel welcome in a 'church'. It is a strategy that 'goes to them, not expecting they will come to us'.

Locals and workers worshipping together in locally based, relevant and connected faith communities:

Worship is at the heart of inner city ministry, and must be inclusive and available to all. This inclusive worship will assist in breaking down the barriers between those in full time ministry and those with whom they work. It will bring everyone together before God in the acts of prayer, proclamation and liturgy, in order to be empowered together. In both Woolloomooloo and Glebe (and other places as we have the resources) the regular worshipping Fellowships will be places of welcome and hope, refreshment and service, bringing together the activities of all our work and placing them before God for renewed energy, courage and hope.

Ministry that identifies 'Every project a congregation and every congregation a project':

Our concept of the 'church' in inner city ministry is not confined to the practice of worship. Worship will empower a seven day a week 'church' that continues the ministry and work of the 'church', whether in the Long Term Supported Accommodation Unit, the Women's Space for Sex Workers, the Employment Training Program, in the Op Shops, in street level outreach, in the Aboriginal Program - wherever the practice of ministry takes place there will be a 'congregation' requiring the Good News. This in turn means all those engaged in the practice of this ministry will themselves be 'pastors'. We embrace the Protestant tradition of the 'priesthood of all believers'.

The appropriate empowerment of people to take control of their own lives and ministry:

The goal of urban ministry will be to offer people the opportunity to choose what will lead to 'life and life in all its fullness' (John 10:10). At the heart of this process will be the appropriate empowerment of people to take control over their own lives. This will mean that our practice of ministry will not simply be about hand-outs - neither will it foster dependency. This process of empowerment will also apply to the ministry itself. Consequently those of us in full- time ministry will need to consider ourselves as catalyst or *animateurs*, and be aware that the process of empowerment requires a time when we 'hand over' the ministry to those with whom we have been working. This empowerment must however be an appropriate one - hence it will require careful analysis of how our ministries are developing, and how successful our empowering of others has been. It is a careful process of investing in others skills, self-esteem and training so that they in turn can continue the process of empowerment.

Development of participatory contextual bible studies for the people and of the people:

An incarnational presence and a ministry that empowers will also require us to listen to those within our context when they read and interpret the Gospel story for their lives. This will require a new approach to reading the Bible in this context, where ordinary non-

trained readers of the Bible will be given the opportunity to read for themselves the Good News. This reading approach will listen to ordinary readers and their interpretations, and enter with them into conversation with professional readings to guard against self-serving readings or readings that are too context specific. This approach will take seriously that the interpretation of Scripture is not exclusively revealed to the 'wise' but also to the meek and the humble, even as Scripture suggests to the 'babes' in the faith (Matthew 11: 25). Above all, this approach will hand the Bible back to the people, and seek to empower them to read the Good News for their lives today.

Practice is evangelism (not simply words):

Inner city ministry recognises that for those outside the 'church' words are often cheap and the 'church' has been big on words and short on practice. Evangelism needs to move beyond a sharing of 'ideas' or 'arguments' about why people should become Christians, into a material and practical expression of the love of Christ and reflect the invitation we receive from God to be transformed. The practice of our faith - in providing a bed for the homeless, food for the hungry, empowerment for the powerless, justice for those sinned against, a safe place for women, counselling and care, advocacy for exploited migrant women - will lie at the heart of our evangelism. We will use words when necessary! Our faith will be preached in our actions and our actions will be because of our faith.

Conversion is radical life-style change (not merely interior):

For many in the inner city conversion will mean radical life-style change. Those suffering from addictions, those who have been abused, those who have learnt much hatred and anger, those who have always felt rejected by the 'church', those who feel they are not 'good enough' for God, will all in different ways require long-term patient and caring support, as their conversion experience will often mean radical life-style change (that is radical change to the way they live their lives on a daily basis), going well beyond what many refer to as 'giving their heart to Jesus'. While it will mean this, it will mean much more as well, as patterns of life are changed and news ways of living are discovered.

Theology as an 'urban' theology (Christ and Gospel centred) - developed through reflection on our experience and practice in the urban context in light of our faith:

Our developing theology will commence with Jesus Christ as the starting point in our interpretation of Scripture and our context. But our context will also be foregrounded as the starting point in our interpretation of what it means to follow Jesus Christ today in the inner city. As John Vincent has written 'we need to read the Gospels with the eyes of the city, and read the city with the eyes of the Gospel'. An urban theology will commence with the experience of people in that context - especially those who are poor and marginalised - and ask: what does their experience, and ours in working with them - have to say about the shape of faith in Jesus Christ today? What does 'good news to the poor' mean, not just in theory, but in practice. What shape will the 'Good News' take on the streets, and in the back lanes and alleyways of Kings Cross and Woolloomooloo, where people face life and death questions

everyday. In a context where transgender, male and female prostitution occurs 24 hours a day, what does 'liberty to those who are oppressed' really mean? For those who are homeless, those with HIV, those urban Aboriginal people robbed of their culture, their land and their meaning, what shape does the Gospel take - not just in words, but in the actions of those who proclaim the "Good News'? How can we build on God's presence in the city - identify it and name it as the Kingdom of God?

Equality of discipleship of service for all people regardless of race or gender or socio-economic status:

'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3: 27). In response to the diversity of the inner city context, all those who feel called to be a part of ministry in this context will be equally welcome and empowered for discipleship and mission. Class distinctions, gender distinctions, racism will have no place in urban ministry. All are invited to an equality of service, utilising gifts and abilities, exercising leadership and servanthood, equally together in the Kingdom of God.

Being open to participatory organisational change, always through rigorous analysis of context and ministry, and asking of any change proposed whose social, spiritual, political and economic interests such a change is serving:

Participatory decision making and collegiality is an essential aspect of empowering people for ministry. This elicits a culture of trust and co-operation, where organisational changes are mutually discussed and developed with the interests of those with whom we work as the focal point. Unfortunately, as the 'church' has historically illustrated, people often seek to influence an organisation because of self-interest or questions of power, rather than seeking to influence the 'church' to change in order to meet the needs of those with whom they work in ministry. Consequently to safe-guard ourselves from merely becoming a self-serving organisation, when change is proposed we will need to ask whose social, spiritual, political and economic interests such a change is serving. This will require an openness and an honesty in the process of organisational change, and will require the tools of social analysis in order to understand not just the way in which we function as an organisation, but how the society around us also functions.

As Christians engaged in the practice of urban ministry, critically and selectively utilising the practice and insights from secular business, welfare, management and academic sectors, but only as they enhance the purpose of the ministry and do not compromise these urban distinctives:

BICM has grown in response to need. This has meant that as an organisation we have crossed boundaries between 'church' and 'charity' and deliberately blurred lines between the two. The nature of our organisation, management structure and staffing practices, is driven by our ministry in the inner city context, not the other way around. This means we can borrow from a variety of other sectors, whether in terms of management practices or welfare practices but only as they serve the distinctive nature of who we are in our context and enhance the ministry we are committed to.

Small, focussed and effective; committed at the core, open at the edges:

BICM in responding to the needs of the inner city will seek to remain small, focussed and effective. Bureaucratic structures will be minimised. Ministry will be our focus. Effectiveness will be evaluated by our relevance to the context and the meeting of needs. We will not be seduced from our task by a need for quantitative growth, but will seek qualitative growth in the lives of those with whom we minister, and in our own lives also. We will be an open community of people, always inviting others to join us, but with a solid commitment to urban mission and ministry at the centre of what we do.

Encouragement of 'reflection': facilitating time for both self-reflection and community -reflection:

In the multitude of our activities, and the demands of our ministry, we seek to encourage each other to reflect upon our practice. This action-reflection will allow us to be self-critical as well as self-reflective, and will fashion our future activism and faith, so as to enhance our effectiveness. This understands reflection as a proactive way in which to sustain our ongoing ministry and to develop future ministry based upon analysis of what we have done and what our actions have taught us about our context and the shape of future ministry.[382]

This document reflects a local theology shaped and informed by both the local context and commitments of those who formulated it. It stands in some contrast to other theological statements in the wider context of Sydney.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified the major historical and ideological factors that currently shape the national Australian character and conversation. We have identified some of the unique historical, theological and ecclesiological factors that shape the current church 'world' in Sydney. Finally we have identified the particular social indicators relevant to the particular area of Sydney from which and in which the ordinary readers involved in this study exist. Distinctives relating to the work of Baptist Inner City Ministries provides a local theology within which the reading groups took place. Having identified the context, both in broad and specific terms we turn now to an analysis of how this wider and local reality

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382 Unpublished 'Urban Theology Distinctives', Baptist Inner City Ministries, 1997.

shapes and informs the interpretations and readings of the ordinary readers involved in this study, and to what extent these readings are useful in terms of dialogue with professional readings in the Gospel of Luke.

Chapter Four

Text and Context
Dialogue and Conversation

Introduction

It is useful to identify what has taken us to this point in the study. We have thus far identified the following tenets of our theoretical basis: the need to understand readers as active in the process of interpretation, and the need to identify the location of that process. The approach used in facilitating a reading by ordinary real-readers, foregrounding their contemporary human experience as the point of departure for their reading of the Gospel of Luke, has also been identified. Acknowledging that it is crucial to recognise that readers are all socially embodied within a particular context and social location, we have discussed in some detail aspects of the wider Australian context, and the particular Sydney and inner city location of the readers.

We now turn to an analysis of the readings themselves. This exegetical discourse is transcribed in Volume Two of this thesis.

Central to this analysis is the concept of dialogue and conversation. This aspect of the hermeneutical task may be described as dialectical, seeking a dynamic interaction between contemporary interpretations and the history of interpretations, the ordinary reader and the professional reader, text and context, theory and praxis.[383]

The intention of this analysis is to given equal weight in the dialogue/conversation to contemporary readings and interpretations from ordinary real-readers, with

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383 So Sugirtharajah, Voices, p. 436

those readings from the professional biblical scholars in the academic and ecclesial communities. For some, this equal weighting will cause alarm and concern in terms of the legitimacy of the readings from ordinary real-readers. This issue will be addressed in chapter five.

Others will suggest that communication between such diverse contexts and locations is fraught with too many difficulties to be possible. It is anticipated some of these issues will surface and be discussed in the process of the analysis of the readings. However the intention is to proceed despite the difficulties, in the spirit of inquiry suggested by Duncan Forrester in his article 'Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Relativism':

> Communication, between one context and another very different one, is no doubt difficult and bristles with problems, but it is a counsel of despair to assume it is virtually impossible, precisely because this assumes an absolutizing of one's own culture and the dominant forms of understanding and interpretation in that culture.[384]

The professional readers chosen as dialogue/conversation partners in this process of analysis, have been chosen as broadly representative of particular approaches in biblical studies, in order to provide a diversity of readings of the Lukan text. They are: Joseph Fitzmyer[385] (historical-critical approach), Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe[386], and Sharon Ringe's recent commentary on Luke[387] (feminist approach), Robert Tannehill[388] (literary-critical approach), Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh[389] (social-scientific approach). In addition to these professional readers, other scholars representative of these various approaches are included in the process where relevant.

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384 Duncan Forrester (Ed.), 'Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Relativism' in Michael Wadsworth, Ways of Reading the Bible (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981), p. 124.

385 Jospeh Fitzmyer, The Gospel According to Luke I - IX (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1981); and The Gospel According to Luke X - XXIV (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1985).

386 Carol A. Newsom & Sharon H. Ringe (Eds.), The Women's Bible Commentary (London: SPCK, 1992).

387 Sharon Ringe, Luke (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

388 Robert Tannehill, The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation Vol. 1., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

389 Bruce J. Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Social-Scientific Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Minneapolis: Ausburg Fortress, 1992).

Other readings by ordinary real-readers are also included in the process, in particular the campesinos in Solentiname, and readers in Edinburgh and Africa.

To assist with the process of analysis the general line of inquiry proceeds to answer a number of questions. What contemporary meaning did the groups identify? The extent to which dominant ideology/theology informs the group, and to what extent their answers reflect what the bible 'ought' to say. The extent to which they were dependent upon historical material to find meaning in the text, and the extent to which knowledge of other biblical material was involved. In what way does context and social location shape and inform the readings of the ordinary (and professional) readers? To what extent did readers draw upon their own life experience(s) to arrive at an interpretation?

In light of the readings of both professional scholars and other ordinary readers the analysis will then consider the similarities and differences across and between the groups and other readings. In the process of analysis of the readings from groups that were a part of this research, the nature, type and intention of my interventions into the reading process will also be analysed, using the work of Kennard, Roberts and White outlined above in chapter two. Finally we will attempt draw some preliminary conclusions concerning any implications this analysis might identify for contemporary hermeneutics.

Poverty and Justice

Luke 4: 14-30

Military Chaplains[390]

No interventions were required to commence the discussion. The group initially focused upon the reaction of the people to Jesus as 'Joseph's son', interpreting the comment as 'a put down' or 'tall poppy stuff', and then upon the reaction of the people to the words of Isaiah read by Jesus. The group agreed the words would have been familiar to the audience in the synagogue, concluding the audience's amazement at the 'gracious words' must have been due to 'the way he read it'. The focus became the presentation of Jesus, rather than the content of what was read by Jesus. My first intervention attempted to get the readers to focus on the content. The Isaian source of the reading was identified as well as the different translations between to 'bring' (NRSV) and to 'preach' (GNB), the latter more 'verbal', the former more 'active'. My next intervention attempted again to focus discussion on the content of Jesus' reading and its meaning for contemporary experience. Discussion returned to homiletics, before one reader noted 'to jump back to Jesus's culture the people all named are . . . marginalised - that is they are people who didn't earn a salary or wage'. It was suggested in contemporary society similar groups of people are marginalised. Reader 3 challenged this idea suggesting in a military context there were no poor people -' they may be stupid, but not poor'. The group could not identify 'prisoners' or 'blind' literally. There was no agreement if there were oppressed in the military, although one reader suggested private soldiers possibly could be.

Outside of the military Aboriginal people were identified as oppressed by one reader, which elicited a loud protest. Even if they did suffer some oppression it was noted they were such a minority, it was not a major issue. The group agreed

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390 Volume Two, pp. 85 - 90.

some people in Australia may be disadvantaged, but not oppressed. 'Oppression' was identified in terms of government decisions affecting a person's home, in this case with regard to changes that had been made to flight paths surrounding Sydney's International airport. Discussion focused on involvement in public protest at this form of oppression. My response, a guided intervention, intentionally asked readers to focus on the political aspect of the text. I was interested in moving the discussion beyond individual concerns to see if the reader's could deal with the political question in a wider context. The group agreed that military personnel were instructed to be the servants of government, rather than engaged in the political process. One reader inquired 'what does the gospel say to a military officer who wants to be an activist'? The response was 'get out'.

The group agreed that the needs of individuals in the army validated exclusion of the 'prophetic' in terms of a military chaplains' ministry. While to an extent oppression in the army could be addressed, if one was military personnel, this precluded one from dealing with oppression in society.

A maintenance intervention moved the focus onto verses 23 and following.

The group understood the text with the help of historical information they recalled from their theological training. While one reader suggested that there was enough information in the story to understand its meaning without historical material, this was not agreed to by others. In an attempt to summarise I offered an interpretative intervention, one of my most lengthy interventions made in the entire process, and then attempted to get the group to summarise their discussion.

Contemporary meaning was identified as: 'any officer who speaks out politically will be thrown out.' The focus became power. The power of Jesus illustrated by walking through the crowd led the chaplains to question why they could not be prophetic and 'triumphant' in the military. The group agreed that as Chaplains they needed to make it clear to commanding officers that in a sense they were there to

serve the soldiers (the lower and less powerful ranks), and this may mean the chaplains may say 'things they don't want to hear'. This led to some final comments about becoming mediocre in the job.

Redfern Reading Group[391]

Initial interventions attempted to focus on the plot. I was concerned that the group, all from traditional church backgrounds, but now marginalised from that background, and who felt they had a grasp of what the Bible meant in general terms, would read the text superficially and produce cliched, expected or frivolous readings. In hindsight this concern was unfounded.

After some discussion regarding the process of Jesus being invited to read, attention was given to verse 15. It was noted that headings before sections of the text seemed to be distracting or misleading, and how that influenced interpretation.

It was noted that different groups would read the story differently: 'it's interesting that the Pentecostal groups would focus in on the "Spirit of the Lord" where we as a group from our backgrounds would focus on "good news to the poor"'. A reader identified that the text 'doesn't talk about the prosperity type theology' and suggested that as the members of the reading group were not poor, they would have more in common with the congregation that became angry at the words of Isaiah, rather than with Jesus. This led to recognition that the anger of the congregation was after Jesus told the stories of Naaman and the widow. It was agreed that the words of Jesus quoted from Isaiah were about the 'mission of the church'. This led to discussion about whether those mentioned in the Isaian passage were real people, or the conditions identified were spiritual. A response suggested a spiritual meaning reflected where the group had come from: 'we have years of stuff pumped down our throats about the spiritual stuff, about

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391 Ibid., pp. 111 - 116.

spiritualising Luke'. This led to the identification of people in the categories listed in the verses in the Isaian passage (looked up by the group) and what response could be given in our contemporary experience.

'Recovery of sight to the blind' was interpreted physically and literally. A member of the group was awaiting a corneal transplant. The donation of corneas was identified as a material contribution to her being liberated from her encroaching blindness. This interpretive approach encountered difficulty in terms of setting prisoners free, especially with the more conservative member of the group. This reflected the dominant view in society that people in prison were there because of crime, not as victims. The group made the distinction between 'captives' and 'prisoners', the former being those who were held for reasons other than crime, for example political prisoners. A practical outcome of this discussion was the establishment of an Amnesty International writing group. The reaction of the audience to Jesus and mention of his father was interpreted by the group negatively, specifically the 'tall poppy syndrome'. It was agreed the stories of Naaman and the widow, could not be understood without recourse to Old Testament historical material. The reading group set 'homework' for various members to research the background to these stories.

Glebe Group One [392]

Discussion commenced with one reader identifying the 'good news' as 'spiritual good news'. This was immediately contested. 'I don't agree. Jesus says its me and its here and now these things will happen - not some time else.' The group considered the reaction to Jesus as the 'carpenter's son' as negative and a rejection of Jesus - 'They don't think he is good enough'. This notion of goodness appears to be based upon the occupation of Jesus' father and reflects contemporary concepts of status in society through occupation.

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392 Ibid., pp. 3 - 4.

My intervention returned discussion to the opening response as I was interested to see if the group could identify the conscious or unconscious reasons for reading the text 'spiritually'. The group took the text literally, and after noting Jesus did not physically release prisoners suggested the more apparent meaning of the text was 'prisoners of sin and guilt'. Temporarily the group discussed the meaning of the 'year of the Lord's favour' before considering the question of poverty in contemporary terms. One reader identified poverty in relative terms as minimal due to the fact that 'everyone gets a benefit', and concluded spiritual poverty was 'worse than real poverty'. Spiritual poverty was then defined as ' . . . when you live locked into your own world and you never think to help anyone else. That's real poverty and spiritual poverty as well'. This led to the conclusion that poverty may be both spiritual and material, with one reader responding that if good news to the poor meant acceptance of the 'prosperity gospel' - 'I don't want anything of it'.[393]

Material poverty was identified as a condition that would always be, which provoked my question: 'Does this mean it is a good thing?'. The response indicated it was not and that the text offered hope to those who were materially poor. Blindness was then interpreted in a physical sense and a contemporary application offered as follows: 'To see God's will is recovery of sight. Like when you see a person in pain and you stop to help them you see what God wants you to see'.

In the stories told by Jesus the group identified Naaman as a non-Jew, and the widow as marginalised, concluding it was 'mass jealousy' by the congregation in the synagogue in the form of racism that led to their hatred of Jesus. This lead to the identification of the church as a place for respectable people, and how society was set up to show preferential treatment to the rich (in this example in the health system). The concluding interpretation of the text was: 'So he's [Jesus] having a

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393 The reader identified as Ray, who was particularly concerned with interpreting poverty in a spiritual sense left the group before its third meeting. The explanation given by another group member was that Ray suffered from schizophrenia, had difficulty with embracing alternative views and was firmly committed to the relationship between poverty and spirituality.

shot at people who think they are too good to assist people in need. God wants this as the story says. You know what people do even if they think a person has cancer let alone someone with HIV'. The readers did not ask for or require additional information to interpret the story of Naaman or the widow.

Analysis

The military chaplains identified that the text had a prophetic and political contemporary meaning. Recognising and accepting their military context precluded prophetic and political activity for them in society, they attempted to discover what meaning the text had in their military context. Addressing 'oppression' with individual soldiers validated their role as military chaplains, and the relinquishment of a prophetic (and political) role in society. Reflecting their training as clergy their initial focus was the power in homiletical terms of the reading of Jesus. The power of Jesus resurfaced in his ability to pass through the crowd, and was related to their contemporary experience and lack of similar power.

A number of other contemporary issues surfaced in the reading offered by the chaplains. Obviously their military context, identified by the group in their first meeting as 'the intersection of two very conservative institutions - the military and the church',[394] played a dominant role. Implicit racism appears to have informed the consideration of who is oppressed in Australia, and the myth of egalitarianism in terms of the 'poor'. Therefore the poor were poor because of their own stupidity. Both these responses may reflect an ideological commitment to the belief that in a democratic capitalist country there are no oppressed people. Categories of absolute poverty and relative poverty are utilised, the latter preferable in the affluent west, endorsing the belief that capitalism has eradicated poverty in the western world. Discounting poverty in one's own context, one can feel 'charitable' about giving to the 'poor' overseas.

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394 Volume Two, p. 83.

Where oppression was identified it was in terms of government interference with private property, reflecting both the ideology of individualism as well as the place home ownership has in the national conversation. Social location is most evident at this point in the discussion, although more transparent when the chaplains identify themselves as working mainly with 'officers'. As middle-class home owners, working as officers within a military context, social location directly informs the way in which the group interprets the text. It is clear they drew heavily on their own life experiences which reinforced their ideological commitments, shaped by military life and its 'world view'.

The Redfern group, by way of contrast, rejected spiritualising the categories of people identified by Jesus in the reading from Isaiah, understanding those who were poor, blind, captive and oppressed in material and physical terms. Responding to people and their needs in this category was identified as the mission of the church. Rejection of the dominant evangelical approach to the text in Sydney, out of which the group had emerged, informs the group, shaping to some extent the nature of their final reading. The identification of the group with the congregation's response to Jesus identified the readers of part of a 'privileged group' in view of poverty and oppression, and as such was self-critical. As a group with considerable background in the church it is interesting that the group chose not to interpret the stories of Naaman and the widow without further 'research' and background material. This would suggest a dependence upon such a reading strategy, even when the opportunity was available to read the text synchronically.

A practical response to those suffering political oppression by this group was the establishment of an Amnesty International letter writing group and at a later date a Fruit and Vegetable Co-operative for low-income families in Woolloomooloo and Glebe. This Co-operative still exists and provides affordable food to over one hundred families.

Even though the Glebe group was characterised by differing opinions concerning whether the categories of poverty, blindness, captivity and oppression were spiritual or material, contemporary experience dominated discussion. The Glebe group interpreted the passage as having contemporary meaning in terms of hope for the materially and spiritually poor, that God chooses people other than those whom one would expect, and that Jesus is having 'a shot' at people who think they are too good to help people in need. The group identified racism as the cause of the anger of the congregation, reflecting an awareness of racism within their own context. The widow likewise was identified as marginalised, again reflecting the experience of the readers. Many widows make up the population of the Glebe housing estate. Class divisions and inequities between poor and rich, or those socially acceptable and those who are not, also surface clearly in the interpretation of the Glebe group. This group, unlike other groups, interpreted the stories of Naaman and the widow without reference to historical or background material.

The ordinary readers in Glebe, Redfern, the military, the campesinos in Solentiname, and the readers used by David Sinclair[395] in Edinburgh generally arrive at interpretations of the text out of and shaped by their experience. Sinclair's study with the three reading groups identified as A, B, and C focussed on poverty and Luke 4: 16-21. Sinclair posed three questions, who are the poor?, what causes poverty?, what about the church?. Each question was followed by up to eight quotes from a variety of sources to stimulate discussion. The specific aim of this study was to 'examine the views of participants concerning poverty and how they linked their views on that subject with their church membership and with their reading of the bible'.[396]

Group A (described as lower middle class) was the only group insisting from the beginning that 'the poor' in the passage from Luke has absolutely nothing to do

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395 Sinclair, The Influence Of Power And Class On The Biblical Interpretation of Church Members.

396 Ibid., p.7.

with material poverty. Group B (described as more affluent) concluded there 'that in this country there are no longer any poor people in that sense' opting for relative poverty. Group C agreed more with the quote from Gutierrez that poverty was a lack of goods.[397]

Sinclair notes Group C was the only group to accept the idea of class, more as an attitude than in monetary terms, while others did so only with equivocation. Sinclair's conclusion at the end of the first study is that the readings of the three groups verify Parkin's thesis[398] that there are three different types of meaning system: dominant, subordinate and radical. This indicates for Sinclair that the three systems all exist within the church, and 'their very existence begins to support the assertion within liberation theology that social position has a bearing on reception and understanding of the Gospel'.[399] While the conclusion is supported by the readings of the Glebe and chaplains' groups, the Redfern group adds a further dimension to the issue. The Redfern group, all educated and mostly middle-class in terms of social position, do not reflect or endorse the dominant meaning system in the church. Not marginalised in a material or social sense, but marginalised in an ecclesiological sense, the group is aware of the dominant meaning system, but rejects it in favour of a more 'radical' meaning system. Critical awareness, either a product of or leading to this marginalisation from the 'traditional' church, appears capable of overriding the dominant meaning system surrounding their social location. The radical meaning system also appears to provide a position from which the group can be, albeit timidly, self-critical of their social location. The experience of marginalisation appears fundamental to the Redfern group. This does appear to confirm Sinclair's conclusion 'that experience is prior to, and quite capable of overriding, ideas'.[400]

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397 Ibid., pp. 73-86.

398 Parkin's thesis is discussed in my analysis of Sinclair's approach in chapter one ; and in chapter one and chapter ten of Sinclair's thesis.

399 Ibid., p. 94.

400 Sinclair, p.77.

Sinclair notes there were two other questions relating to 'the day of the Lord's favour' that were dropped because the saying was too 'obscure to be tackled at this early stage in the study program'.[401] Neither the chaplains or the Redfern group referred to this saying, while the Glebe group simply accepted that it meant 'the year Jesus begins his teaching', surprisingly similar to Fitzmyer's understanding that the saying refers to the 'Period of Jesus', and the new way of salvation announced by him.[402] This also compares favourably to Tannehill's suggestion that it refers to 'the time of salvation characterised by good news for the poor', rejecting any connection between this and the Jubilee year.[403] No group refers to the concept of a Jubilee Year, a major interpretative consideration for Malina and Rohrbaugh, and Ringe. Obviously for the ordinary readers utilisation of Isaiah 61's imagery built upon the Jubilee year of Leviticus 25, was unavailable as an interpretive key to the saying.[404] It is clear that Fitzmyer is also dependent upon Second Isaiah within its postexilic context as an interpretative and historical key to reconstruct who the four groups mentioned in the Deutero-Isaian quote were in Jesus' day.[405]

A significant difference surfaces between Fitzmyer and all the reading groups in terms of the response of the audience to Jesus in verse 22. Fitzmyer identifies two stages of audience reaction to Jesus. The first reaction is one of admiration at his gracious words, which could include 'captivating eloquence', a focus not unlike the chaplain's group. 'Is this not Joseph's son' Fitzmyer suggests is pleasant surprise rather than indignation.[406] The second stage identified in verse 28 is fury produced by the stories of Naaman and the widow of Zarephath, as Jesus implies that his activity would have better results amongst those who are outside his own township. All three ordinary reading groups identified these words as negative, and referred to their contemporary Australian understanding of the 'tall poppy

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401 Ibid., p. 73.
402 Fitzmyer, Vol.1., p. 533.
403 Ibid., p. 68.
404 So Ringe, p.69.
405 Fitzmyer, Vol.1., pp. 532-533. So to Ringe, pp. 68-70.
406 Ibid., p.535; Fitzmyer also notes how this does not fit with the infancy narratives.

syndrome', as the reason. In a similar manner Ringe identifies these words as a product of 'familiarity breeds contempt'.[407] Malina and Rohrbaugh however interpret the comment about Jesus' father as reflective of social location, a lowly artisan's son, and discuss the resulting conversation in terms of 'challenge-riposte' in first century society. The conclusion is that in this first century world of honour-shame 'Jesus evidences considerable skill at riposte and thereby reveals himself to be an honourable and authoritative teacher'. [408] While fitting with the Glebe group's suggestion that Jesus was being criticised in terms of social location determined by his father's occupation, Malina and Rohrbaugh appear to understand the reaction of the audience not in terms of the content of Jesus' readings and subsequent stories, but in terms of his ability at challenge and riposte. He gets the better of them and they get angry. This has little fit with any other readings of the text.

The Glebe group is the only group to identify the reasons why the audience is furious with Jesus. They note that the audience in the story were angry because of the fact Jesus was being inclusive of others across racial and class boundaries, an inclusiveness the audience would not accept. The Glebe group have commonality with the campesinos in Solentiname, but only to a point.

Cardenal and the campesinos identify the story as a prophecy of liberation in the broadest sense, including 'people without education who are like blind people' and 'prisoners in every sense', like 'a servant, a prisoner of a rich person', and those whose minds are captive.[409] This prophecy of liberation is not readily taught through the Church, and those who embrace it were identified as 'communists'.[410] The 'year of grace' was identified in contemporary terms as one that 'should be agrarian reform and the socialisation of all means of production.'[411] There was consensus that this sermon of Jesus was 'his first political manifesto'. The

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407 Ringe, p.67.
408 Malina & Rohrbaugh, p.307.
409 Cardenal, Vol. 1, p.129.
410 Ibid.
411 Ibid., p.130.

negative aspect of this manifesto was identified: 'he didn't come to give any news to the rich'.[412] Cardenal's final response, that the good news is for the poor, 'and the only ones who can understand it and comment on it are the poor people, not the great theologians' [413] is confronting. This does not give any place to people from social locations who are not poor, but can still read the text and act on it in liberative ways, such as the Redfern group noted above.

There appears to be little fit between the interpretation of Fitzmyer, Tannehill, Ringe and Malina and Rohrbaugh in this particular reading. An essential point of contrast is the way in which the ordinary readers accept the story as they read it. Distinctions between authentic words of Jesus and early church tradition do not arise. The ordinary readers appropriate the words of Jesus in Isaiah, and apply them to their context. The military chaplains appear to dissolve the text into their particular military context, and apologise for their inability as a result of this context to act on the text's prophetic nature.

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412 Ibid., p. 132.
413 Ibid., p. 133.

On Poverty and Riches

Luke 6: 20-26

Military Chaplains[414]

After a brief comment on verse 29: 'In this context if people speak well of you it may mean your not doing your job!', the dominant focus of the group was with regard to the meaning of verse 20. A similar statement regarding the poor in Luke 4: 16-21 was made: there are no poor in the army, but 'we have stupid'. This referred to the assumption by the reader that people were paid adequately so if they were poor it was due to their inability to control their expenditure and finances. Difficulty with the concept that to 'be poor is to be blessed' led to the inquiry 'So Jesus was wrong?'. This difficulty with Jesus identifying the poor as blessed led to two comments 'I don't know what Jesus meant', and a stronger response from reader 3: 'I think it's stupid', with the admission he could not 'make any sense of it'.

My intervention attempted to move the group forward. I was interested to see if the readers would be able to continue to read the text rather than just reject it outright. A degree of tension had entered into the reading process. Hence I inquired to whom Jesus was addressing this teaching, an almost irrelevant question, in the hope it would diffuse some of the tension. The response suggested that it may have been the disciples and that their experience may be that they were poor and hungry. However this was discounted in view of the woes being addressed to the same audience, and the group agreed the audience included both the disciples and others.

Focus quickly returned to the concept of the poor being 'blessed'. A reader commented 'your position in life seems to determine your position in the Kingdom'.

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414 Volume Two, pp. 105 - 106.

My next open, yet partially guided facilitation, attempted to elicit what was happening for the readers at both the conscious, as well as the unconscious level.

The discussion refocussed upon the relationship to material poverty, with an interpretation offered by one reader that the more financially secure he became the further he would move away 'from the Kingdom'. Reader 3 had become significantly agitated and strongly asserted that a 'modifier' should be inserted into the text which made it clear that the meaning was about spiritual poverty. When partially challenged by another reader, reader 3 declared that Luke should not be in the canon, and that he would throw it out, after which he physically threw his Bible across the room. My intervention attempted to discover why the reader had reacted so strongly to this verse. His response is significant: 'Because its about faith and response but all this is talking about is material - on this basis all you have to do is give away your goods and go around in sack cloth and you're in.' Reader 1 commented that Luke *was* in the canon and therefore was authentic. Another intervention sought to return the focus of the group to the question of contemporary meaning.

Verse 22 was identified as having contemporary significance for one reader. Loss of job and the pension that accompanied it due to the chaplain taking a stand on an issue, would evoke faith. Verse 24 was identified as a 'threat', and the accumulation of riches as a possible way in which one might be moving further and further away from the Kingdom of God.

My next intervention attempted to probe a little deeper with the question of why Jesus would be saying such things. The group noted that ruthless material accumulation was possibly 'damaging to your discipleship'. The example given was Alan Bond and Christopher Skase, two of Australia's most notorious millionaires, both still being pursued for fraud. This was balanced with reference to Dick Smith another famous philanthropic millionaire in Australia. This led to the

conclusion 'so some people can be rich while others can be poor'. The reference to the rich young ruler was not easily understandable.

Glebe Group Two[415]

The group understood the teaching of Jesus in a literal as well as physical and material sense. On the basis of a presupposition that suffering is not condoned by God, the 'blessings' were interpreted as 'words of great hope' for those who were suffering poverty, hunger or sadness. The readers did not think these verses condoned poverty, hunger or sadness, but signalled that this type of suffering would be changed. The group also identified that this involved them in the process of change in Glebe.

The concept of being rewarded in heaven was accepted literally. The group repeated what was to be their common response to teaching on riches in Luke by identifying and condemning rich and powerful Australians who they felt exploited or did not care for the poor. The group had no problem accepting that the 'woes' were a literal contemporary warning to such people. Verse 26 was also understood to be about people in power, and that power and being praised in our society today did not mean you were acceptable to God, but could be held accountable by God. Class divisions in Australia are identified, and directly shape and inform the reader's responses.

Analysis

The Glebe group identified the teaching of Jesus as good news to those in their contemporary world who were suffering poverty and as sharp warning or condemnation to those they identified as rich in their contemporary context. The group had no difficulty in understanding the text in a material and physical way. The military chaplains concluded that if there was any contemporary meaning in

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415 Ibid., pp. 15 - 16.

this teaching of Jesus, it was a warning about the dangers posed to discipleship through the accumulation of wealth. There was a strong rejection by one reader that the words of the Lukan Jesus were to be taken in a material sense, and therefore any contemporary meaning would have to be understood in spiritual terms.

The stark contrast between the two groups appears to be directly related to alternative social locations and the ideologies informing each location. Within the military context it appears that the ideology of capitalism, where the accumulation of wealth is central to the consumerism and materialism that drives this ideology, strongly informed at least one reader, and appears clearly to inform the group's conclusion, that while accumulated wealth could pose difficulties for those who were Christians, and the text condemned the accumulation of wealth by illegitimate means, the way in which one used one's wealth was the appropriate meaning for the group. Discussion did not really move beyond verse 20 which dominated the group's consideration of the entire passage.

The group appears to be informed by the belief that democratic capitalism has eradicated systemic poverty. Consequently individual poverty is caused by stupidity or lack of skill. The military chaplains located in middle class Australian society, with a commitment to ownership of private property and the accumulation of private goods as a legitimate part of living within this class, appear to react to any condemnation implied in the passage for those who were not materially poor. Although not explicit, there may be some remaining commitment to the 'prosperity gospel' underlying the group's reading of the text.

The Glebe group, all residents in public housing and in receipt of social security pensions did not have any difficulty in reading the blessings as good news for their contemporary experience. Neither did they have any difficulty identifying those who were the object of the woes. A prevalent attitude amongst public housing residents is the concept that those who are rich, and who have no interest in the

needs of the poor, are greedy, most likely dishonest, and are in collusion with government. For both reading groups contemporary life experience within their particular contexts *and* the broader Australian context directly influences the way in which they read the text.

Historical material did not surface in the discussion of either group. The military chaplain, reader 3, justified his rejection of any material meaning in the text with reference to 'the rest of Scripture', but without being specific. The other use of Scripture in this group by Reader 1 appears at first confused. Reference to the rich young ruler as evidence that it is how one uses wealth and not the accumulation of it implies that the chaplain making reference to this story understands it to be a condemnation of the decision the rich young ruler makes rather than the fact he is rich.

No parallel was drawn between this Lukan teaching and the Matthean 'sermon on the mount', the most common starting point for the majority of professional readings of this text. The Glebe group does not make mention of the original audience, a focus for scholars like Fitzmyer and Tannehill, while the military chaplains refer to the audience only in passing.

Both reading groups, although in different ways, contrast with Fitzmyer, who identifies the disciples as the intended audience, and who were 'the real poor, hungry, grief-stricken, and outcasts'.[416] Fitzmyer acknowledges that the sermon touches on the concerns of daily existence, but argues the disciples are declared 'blessed' because their 'share in the kingdom will guarantee them abundance, joy, and a reward in heaven'.[417] While Luke does not spiritualise the condition of the disciples suggests Fitzmyer, those who suffer these things 'now', are assured things will change, and for Fitzmyer that is essentially after death. '[Jesus] thus contrasts the present earthly condition of individual Christians with that following

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416 Fitzmyer, Vol. 1, pp. 627 & 631.
417 Ibid., p. 631.

their death'.[418] This is further reflected in Fitzmyer's interpretation of verse 21, which he translates as follows "'blessed (are) those hungering now, for you shall be sated," i.e. *by God*.[419] This implies that there is no 'earthly' solution for those suffering.

The Glebe readings question this interpretative approach, precisely at the point of human experience. It can be assumed that Fitzmyer is not writing from a social location of 'earthly' poverty. The 'earthly ' issues driving his reading process do not appear to be an urgent hope that the experiences of poverty, hunger, grief, religious, cultural or social ostracism will come to an 'earthly' end. The readings of the Glebe group, driven by a desire to see poverty and suffering end in the 'here and now' expose how material comfort appears to promote spiritualised readings of the text where solutions are other-worldly and non-materialistic. The Glebe group it should be noted understood the blessings to signal relief from suffering in a material sense and in light of verse 23 in a 'heavenly' sense also.

For Fitzmyer the woes are not directed at the disciples, but at the privileged listeners of Jesus, the 'rich, well-fed and carefree, and those well spoken of'. These woes are concerned with eschatological concerns, not a condemnation of material riches, but by implication a certain short-sightedness, induced by that status' which 'leads such persons to think that there is nothing more to have', which is heaven.[420] The focus of Fitzmyer on eschatological rewards is not a focus for either of the reading groups. The military chaplains have the closest fit with Fitzmyer.

Closer fit appears between the readings of the Glebe group and the conclusions of both Tannehill, and Ringe.

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418 Ibid., p. 633.
419 Ibid. (italics mine).
420 Ibid., p. 636.

Tannehill identifies these verses as 'sayings and parables of reversal'[421] but not only in an eschatological sense. He prefaces his remarks by suggesting human society perpetuates structures of oppression and injustice, but that God intervenes on the side of the poor, a disruptive event incarnated in Jesus and announced in a variety of places in Luke, including the beatitudes of Luke 6:20-26.[422] A parallel to the Magnificat, these verses proclaim a social reversal, 'a radical change in the situation of contrasting economic and social groups'.[423] It is implied that the reversal is a this worldly material event.[424] This interpretation contrasts with the military chaplains.

Ringe, within a framework of comparison with the Matthean beatitudes, identifies those named in verses 20 - 23 as 'economically destitute', oppressed and marginalised in a material sense and identifies the blessing as part of the reversal that 'characterises God's project'. This rejects spiritualising the blessings, or accepting that a condition in itself is 'blessed'.[425] This fits with the Glebe group, but is at odds with the military chaplains who identified the condition of poverty as the object of the blessing, rather than that the poor would be blessed because their poverty would be brought to an end.

Malina and Rohrbaugh interpret the blessings and woes strictly in terms of the Lukan community and through their identification of the first century agrarian world as an honour/shame society, characterised by limited good. They conclude the concept of a honourable rich man was a 'first century oxymoron'.[426] The woes identified people of shame, while the blessings identify people of honour. The terms rich and poor are not exclusively economic terms, but social terms 'that describe a social condition relative to one's neighbour: the poor are the weak, and

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421 Tannehill, pp. 109-110.
422 Ibid., p. 109.
423 Ibid., p. 208.
424 Tannehill does not state so himself but the quote he utilises form Jacques Dupont certainly makes this conclusion; see Ibid., ftnt.11.
425 Ringe, p. 92.
426 Malina & Rohrbaugh, p. 324.

the rich are the strong'.[427] The blessings address those already in the Christian community but also indicate the fate that awaits the rich who join the Christian community. Luke, it is suggested, is uncompromising in his demand that this cost for the rich be paid.[428] It appears the teaching of the Lukan Jesus has little relevance for contemporary experience where the Christian community in the western world is no longer characterised by poverty, social ostracism, hunger or grief, but quite the reverse. Little fit appears between this interpretation of the text and the readings of the Glebe group. Malina and Rohrbaugh offer no suggestion that the Lukan Jesus has any concern to reverse what is. Rather the poverty of the Christian community is an honourable thing, and if you want to join it that's what you should expect. Reversal in the present or in the future is not hinted at. The teachings are so enculturated that they have little contemporary application. If this is the objective of the social-scientific approach, to avoid at all costs anachronisms and the projection of contemporary experience in determining the meaning of the text, then the objective is achieved, but at the cost of the text having contemporary meaning.

There is a clear fit between the Glebe readers and the campesinos in Solentiname, although the extent to which human experience informs the campesino's readings is more evident.

Having dealt with the Matthean version of the beatitudes, and commencing the reading at verse 24 the campesinos identified a 'logical reason' for the woes to follow the beatitudes. 'For Christ humanity is divided into two well-defined classes, and he's in favour of one and against the other'.[429] The rich are condemned because they have no feeling for those who are poor and suffering, and also because the poor provide the labour to make the rich rich. Contemporary experience, and a material reading of the woes, pointed the group to the reversal they anticipated in the hoped for revolution. Discussion concerning verse 23's

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427 Ibid., p. 325.
428 Ibid., p. 323.
429 Cardenal, p. 186.

reference to the 'other life' lead to the group's acceptance that social change is 'in this life and in the other'.[430] Verse 26 was read from the campesino's contemporary experience identifying those who are spoken well of as priests 'who are on the side of capitalism', while those spoken badly of are priests like Cardenal himself. Little attention is given by the readers to historical material at all, and only in passing by Cardenal. Contemporary experience and social location play a clear role in arriving at the readings of the campesinos and the Glebe group, but also of the military chaplains, albeit with very different outcomes. A similar conclusion regarding professional readings invites ongoing suspicion and inquiry.

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430 Ibid., p. 188.

On Love of Enemies

Luke 6: 27-31

Military Chaplains[431]

My intervention referred to the tension that had surfaced in the group from the previous discussion regarding verses 20-26. My interest was to see if the tension regarding the teaching of the Lukan Jesus about poor and rich would be heightened by discussion of the teaching of Jesus relating to love for one's enemies.

An immediate distinction was made between personal ethics and national ethics. This was due to one reader's view that the police and military are given the right by society 'to use force and violence for the greater good of society'. It was also suggested this teaching of Jesus was aimed at Christians only. My intervention sought to promote the forward movement of the group by asking 'what does it mean?'.

Reader 3 identified the meaning as 'don't kill more than necessary', and if one had to fight, one should stop when one has won. The group agreed, adding that 'love of enemies' meant treating the enemy with dignity, which reader 3 then summarised 'it means kill them cleanly'. It was significant that at this point there was a prolonged period of silence, following which the argument of the inevitability of war, due to human perversity, was cited to validate the previous responses. The group identified the possibility of a 'Neville Chamberlain' response if this teaching of Jesus was 'taken too far'. The nature of the military as a 'defence force' validated this suggestion.

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431 Volume Two, pp. 106 - 107.

The group considered that as military chaplains they were not in control of the military 'culture', one that demanded results in war, where military decisions had to be made. An example of the destruction of a town of 10000 people in order to end a war was identified as a permissible military option.

Reader 3 suggested love of enemies would lead to power without restraint and corruption. In response it was suggested that the human condition was not hopeless and the example given was that of the commanding officer at the battle of My Lai who did not let the soldiers 'butcher' the dead Vietcong. This action encapsulated the meaning of this text for at least one reader. Being in the military in a non-democratic society was discounted as an option for this chaplain, reinforcing the concept that military action is justifiable in the defence of democracy. This was supported by others in the group who identified wickedness as more evident in non-democratic societies as opposed to democratic societies.

The relevance of the text to the military was then rejected as follows: 'But the rules of engagement in war govern response. Kill or be killed. The text is black and white as well. It is not about limited rules of engagement and it's not talking about life and death situations, so it's not really relevant to soldiers, or to us as chaplains in the military'.

The final consensus was that this text meant restraint was required when dealing with the enemy. Although the passage to be read was verses 27-36, the discussion did not proceed past verse 27.

Glebe Group Two[432]

The group identified these words as the 'very hard words of Jesus'. This text was considered immediately in the specific context and experience of the lives of the readers, with examples of how difficult it was to 'love' people in the local

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432 Ibid., pp. 16 - 18.

community who were difficult to get on with, or who repeatedly 'kept having a go at you'. The meaning of 'love your enemies' was understood as a personal ethic and one had to 'give it your best shot'. Despite the difficulty of this teaching of Jesus it was noted that it could not be ignored just because it was difficult, and that it was 'pretty straight forward teaching' not too hard to understand. This teaching was discussed in terms of its practice in their everyday lives. However the concept of repeatedly putting oneself 'in the firing line' in terms of verse 29 was rejected and the alternative of withdrawing from the conflict in order to look for signs or places for reconciliation was identified as an appropriate action. 'Give to everyone who begs from you' was identified in the Glebe as 'open to abuse'. However it was agreed that genuine need required a response. Verse 31 was read literally as a rule that one should live by. The readers once again focussed on how difficult these verses were to live by, but did not dismiss them as impossible. The last comment on the passage by Gwen suggests that perhaps the teaching was focussed at rich people, as it was rich people who would have more to give away, than those who were poor.

Analysis

The military chaplains concluded 'love of enemies' had no contemporary relevance to their military context. The one exception was that once engaged in war, due to the fallen nature of humanity, the ethic implied the need to treat your enemy with dignity by killing 'him cleanly'. This reading is demonstrably informed and shaped by the dominant ideologies and discourses in military life identified by the chaplains at their second meeting, specifically national security, command and control, and that 'training for war is what we do in the army' in an 'environment with an emphasis upon good planning in order to cover all contingencies and win the battle'.[433] The concept of a 'defence force' in a democratic nation further justified the use of violence and force. This conclusion by the group was reached without reference to what the group had in earlier discussion identified as the

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433 Ibid., pp. 83.

'demon' culture of 'militarism' - an 'ends justifies the means' culture. That social location and context influenced the military chaplains conclusions is self-evident. Although identified as a 'personal ethic' rather than a 'national ethic', discussion of the teachings took place within the context of national and military interests.

This approach contrasted with the Glebe readers who appropriated the teaching in verses 27 and the following verses exclusively in terms of 'personal ethics'. The application of this teaching of Jesus to national issues did not surface. The contemporary meaning of the text was understood as an ideal to be aimed at, and that one needed to keep trying to achieve the standard of behaviour identified by Jesus, which was however 'very hard'. The difficulty of the teaching in 'real life' did not mean that the group did not accept the teaching in a literal sense. Life experience and context shape repeatedly in the group's discussion of the meaning of the verses. The Australian working class 'attitude' of 'giving it your best shot' surfaced when the difficulty of this teaching was explored in practical terms.

Neither group required historical material or made reference to other biblical material to arrive at their final understanding of the meaning of the passage. Both groups discussed the meaning of the text for their contemporary context. They assumed the teaching was for them.

This contrasts with Fitzmyer, Tannehill, Ringe and Malina and Rohrbaugh, who all attempt to identify the original audience to whom this teaching was addressed. This historical audience determines to a large extent the meaning of the text. For Fitzmyer the audience are first century Christians facing persecution. Enemies are their persecutors. Consequently this teaching of Jesus is for the Christian community, and not necessarily those outside it.[434] Fitzmyer does not indicate that this teaching of Jesus has contemporary application, suggesting that the meaning of love of enemies and the teaching that follows 'have to be understood against

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434 Fitzmyer, Vol. 1, p. 630 & p. 637.

the background of an ancient view of enmity'.[435] Identifying both Greek and Jewish views of enmity, and the way in which certain teaching had advocated turning enemies into friends, he concludes the teaching of Jesus was different as it is 'cast in the form of a command', seeking *agape* love.[436]

Ringe concludes that the teaching of Jesus is aimed at the victims of mistreatment, not the perpetuators, suggesting that 'nothing is said about changes mandated for those who abuse, hate, curse, hit, rob or steal'.[437] This contrasts with both groups of ordinary readers who understand themselves as potential perpetrators of mistreatment to those they respectively identify as their enemies. The readers respond to the meaning of the text for themselves and do not interpret its meaning for an historical audience.

Tannehill is more inclusive in identifying the original audience as anyone who was listening, suggesting however that the disciples required the teaching on how to respond to enemies as they were the ones hated and cursed.[438] In this discussion only verse 31 is analysed in the present tense by Tannehill, suggesting a contemporary application for at least this part of the text. However professional readers appear divided as to whether the original audience was the rich/oppressors or the poor/victims. This in itself appears to suggest that value-neutral reconstruction of historical material behind the text must be shaped or influenced by factors external to that reconstruction. One might suggest that compliance with tradition, a dominant ideology or human experience might become apparent should each of the professional reader's personal history be the subject of analysis.

Contemporary experience informed the Glebe group in considering the 'audience' for the teaching in verses 30 and 34. Ability to give away goods seems more

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435 Ibid., p. 637.
436 Ibid.
437 Ringe, pp. 94-95.
438 Tannehill, p.209.

possible for 'the rich' than for the poor. This fits with the suggestion of Malina and Rohrbaugh that the original audience was the 'elite', those who had an extra coat to give away, or who could lend money.[439] The concept of giving and expecting nothing in return is understood to be a 'generalised reciprocity typical of household interaction'.[440] Giving in this manner is located in a first century agrarian domestic context. Malina and Rohrbaugh do not make any comment on verse 27, or how this was meant to address the behaviour of this elite audience.

A contemporary agrarian response to the text might be expected to reflect similar conclusions to those of Malina and Rohrbaugh. This expectation is met with verses 29b and 30, identified by the campesinos in Solentiname as 'teaching for the rich',[441] although the conclusion arrived at reveals a different emphasis '. . . when somebody takes something from us that they need, we should give it to them. We're also shown that when we don't have what we need we ought to take it.'[442] Taking from the rich was justified, although this was differentiated from stealing. Verse 31 was also understood in terms of relationships between the rich and the poor: '. . . just as the rich want us to work for them, so also they should work for us'. Cardenal suggests this is socialism.[443]

However discussion of verses 27 & 28a, by the campesinos, has more in common with the military chaplains, than either the Glebe group or the biblical scholars considered above.

Cardenal records a long silence by the group in response to the reading of the text, after which one reader concluded: 'that nonsense is very confusing. That's crazy.'[444] Like the Glebe group however these 'very difficult' words were

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439 Malina & Rohrbaugh, p.323.
440 Ibid., see also p.325.
441 Cardenal, Vol. 2, p.113.
442 Ibid., p.117.
443 Ibid., p.118.
444 Ibid., p.109.

understood as none the less binding as the 'gospel orders us to do it'.[445] In the following discussion however, where Cardenal has significant input, the behaviour exhorted in the text is understood to relate to the way in which the campesinos' community should operate as a 'personal ethic', but in terms of 'class enemies' it is suggested that love of enemies in the context of Solentiname, does not mean a renunciation of the use of violence. 'Hatred' is prohibited in terms of love of enemies. This is validated by reference to Che Guevera as an example of one who engaged in violent struggle against the class enemies, but with a spirit of 'We must hate the sin and love the sinner'. Cardenal concludes: 'I have the impression that Che never fought because of hatred of other people but because of hatred of injustice'.[446] Cardenal introduces a distinction between 'revolutionary love' and 'reactionary hatred', a distinction built upon by the campesinos, concluding that love of enemy did not mean passive acceptance of the enemy. Neither did it exclude fighting the enemy. The focus is how one goes about the fighting, '. . . we fight them without wanting to oppress them, only to liberate them'.[447] Non-violent action was considered in the context of Che Guevera's treatment of the enemy when they were captured. One reader did suggest that the words based on the example of Jesus were exclusive of the option of violence and that in another passage of Scripture Jesus forbade his disciples to take up arms, although this was contested by other readers.

The contemporary experience of the campesinos in the face of violent oppression in pre-revolutionary Nicaragua undoubtedly informs and shapes the way in which they interpret 'love of enemies'. A similarity appears between the campesinos and the military chaplains, albeit from vastly different ideological commitments and life experiences. The common element is the availably of the use of violence as an option in responding to enemies. It could be argued that the very availability of this

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445 Ibid.

446 Ibid., p. 111.

447 Ibid., p.112.

option whether exercised or not, is a formative factor in interpreting the contemporary meaning of 'love of enemies'.

Contemporary experience and context directly influence the ordinary readers, whether in Glebe, Solentiname or Victoria Barracks. The approach of the biblical scholars identified above, to varying degrees, locates the meaning of the text within the context of the original audience (although different audiences are identified), providing very little direct contemporary meaning for the text.

A question that arises might be what information, interpretive approach or tool of social analysis might lead the military chaplains and the campesinos to understand the text in a different light, despite their context and human experience, which appears to distort the plain meaning of the text.

On Compassion and Faith

Luke 7: 11-17

Women's Group Two[448]

The initial focus of the group was determined by a reader who understood the story to be about the compassion and love of Jesus for mothers. Response to my intervention inquiring about the contemporary meaning of the story in Woolloomooloo, maintained this focus. This focus was directly shaped by the reader's role as a mother, and her feelings about God's concern for mothers and children, including one of her daughters who had died. She argued that God gives preferential treatment to mothers, especially in terms of the needs of children, indicating she could not explain why this was, but it was real for her situation. My intervention 'Is this special concern for mothers because she asked for it?' was a guided intervention testing the extent to which the dominant emphasis upon faith alone in the teaching of conservative evangelicals in Sydney was influential in the reader's consideration as to why Jesus healed the widow's son. I was surprised with the response of the same reader, 'No, it is because he sees the mother, a widow and the one joy she clings to in this world is her son and just that instance of compassion like she should have her son with her - not for any other reason does Jesus do this miracle'.

My next intervention sought to draw others in the group into consideration of the place faith played in the healing event. Two of the readers assumed that there must have been faith present in the woman for the miracle to take place, reflecting dominant teaching amongst Sydney evangelicals. However the motivation of Jesus was continually identified as love and compassion, which crossed literacy boundaries (representative of class boundaries), in order to give people hope. This hope was referred to as resurrection hope and the suggestion made that the

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448 Volume Two, pp. 185 - 187.

healing of the widow's son pointed to Jesus' resurrection in the future. My ongoing interventions in this group moved beyond the usual maintenance or open facilitation to more guided interventions because of my interest in the question of faith in this story. Following the suggestion that faith was essential 'if we want to be his people', the group noted that while church teaching stressed that for God to act in people's lives they had to have faith, that faith played no part in this healing story, in the way in which it had in previous stories the group had discussed. The final comment in the group identified a different approach to the role of faith in the story than that of 'denominations': 'If you don't have 'faith' you won't get nothing from God - that is what a denomination says - to fear God, not to love him. But this says God loves us and acts towards us with compassion'. The focus for this group was the role of the women in the story.

Glebe Group Two[449]

The group responded positively to this story, identifying compassion as the dominant motivation for the healing of the son. The compassion was directed at the widow. The group agreed that the 'feelings' of Jesus reveal 'It is the Christ Incarnate here really in the flesh . . . it's real human stuff'. Without intervention the group noted Jesus did not *have* to heal and that the healing took place without anybody requesting it. Jesus acted 'in the flesh as a person with real feelings' in order to restore life. The mother didn't have faith for the healing to take place, although it was recognised in the centurion in the previous healing story. Recognition that Jesus healed this way provoked surprise in one reader 'So Jesus heals someone. They don't ask. No-one demonstrates faith. It was just Jesus doing it out of compassion. That's new!'. While the group agreed that the widow does not need to express faith for the healing to occur, it is assumed she would have been included in the people glorifying God in verse 16. It was also noted that the healing story indicated that God in 'coming to help his people', did so in

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449 Ibid., pp. 21 - 22.

actions rather than words. The contemporary meaning was summarised as 'God knows what we need and we don't have to ask, because he cares'.

My next intervention asked the group to consider what this story meant in light of those in the church who suggest, if you have enough faith, you will be healed? The group noted that the story did not say that, and that Jesus responded because of the material and legitimate needs of the widow, 'who had no one left to help her'. The widow's legitimate need contrasted with those who ask God for various things but say they get no response. The conclusion 'So maybe you don't have a whole lot of faith for Jesus to be interested in you - now that's not what you normally hear', was identified as good news. An element of open welcome to all people was identified in the story, and a God who did not reject anybody gave hope to all people no matter who they were.

Analysis

Both ordinary reading groups identify the compassion of Jesus as the key motivating factor in this healing story. For one reader this was identified both in contemporary terms and in the story itself to be a compassion that was particularly available to women who were mothers. God was identified as having a preferential option for mothers and children. In the Glebe group the contemporary meaning of the story was appropriated as good news for people of little faith, or people who would not normally feel welcome in a church. Both groups read the story literally and do not question the nature of the miracle, whether it really happened or was constructed by the author.

The feeling of compassion is identified by the Glebe group, as a particularly human attribute in Jesus. This 'humanness' of Jesus is further highlighted when contrasted with other 'feelings' the group identifies in other stories. There is no reference by either group to the widow's spiritual needs, although it is assumed that her faith was one of the many good things that the healing resulted in (verse

16). Compassion, because of the material and physical needs of the woman, is identified as the reason for the healing and the purpose of the story.

This contrasts with Fitzmyer's assertion that the story is concerned to reveal the power and authority of Jesus.[450] Power surfaces repeatedly in Fitzmyer's discussion of the story. Accosting human beings with a challenge of faith in this power is 'the underlying pitch in all resuscitation stories'. Acknowledging that faith in Jesus is not required for the miracle to take place, he proposes the story is told for hagiographic purposes. This conclusion is based upon the assumption of a relationship between this healing story and the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath by Elijah in 1 Kings 17:8-24, and a Lukan intention to cast Jesus 'in the role of *Elias redivivus*'.[451] This interpretive approach is utilised by Tannehill and Ringe to arrive at similar conclusions.[452] Power, glorifying God and the Christological affirmation of the crowd that Jesus is a great prophet, appear to dominate the meaning of the story. The compassion of Jesus recedes into the background. Tannehill and Fitzmyer are heavily dependent upon other passages of Scripture in arriving at a final interpretation of the passage. Neither ordinary reading group used scripture in this manner, although both groups referred to other stories they had previously discussed where faith appeared a crucial factor.

Power and authority do not surface as significant aspects of the story in either ordinary reading group. The alternative focus upon compassion and love for a woman in physical and material need reflects the human experience of the ordinary readers. These readings call into question Fitzmyer's reading, which would appear to be based upon a triumphalist notion of an almighty God of power and authority (particularly male attributes?). Certainly this God would appear more at home in the male dominated academic halls of the Catholic University of which Fitzmyer is a part, than a God of love and compassion with a preferential option

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450 Fitzmyer, Vol. 1., p. 655.
451 Ibid., pp. 656 & 658.
452 Tannehill, Vol. 1., see the following : p.72, p.79 ftnt 7; p88, ftnt 25; p.97 and 230; Ringe. pp. 100-101.

for mothers! While this may seem an unfair assumption, the lack of fit between the focus in the story of the ordinary readers and that of Fitzmyer does require more explanation than merely the fact that the ordinary readers are reading pre-critically. It would appear context and human experience has an effect in the reading process as well.

Fitzmyer does indicate that faith was not involved in the healing, a significant factor for both ordinary reading groups. The Glebe group rejected their perception of the dominant teaching of the church, that it is by faith alone that God acts in people's lives, on the basis of the actions of Jesus in the story. The women readers required more interventions before arriving at the conclusion that teaching that God will only respond to human need if one has faith was more allied to understanding faith as fear, rather than love. Readers in both groups indicated this was a new idea for them to consider. By way of contrast Ringe does not discuss the question of faith in her reading of the story. Her emphasis is upon how the story reveals God's will that life 'will not be thwarted', identifying the economic implication for the widow of the son's death as a key aspect leading to his restoration to life, pointing to God's saving purpose and power.[453]

The ordinary readers identify the widow in a place of economic and social disadvantage without direct reference to historical data. It can be assumed that both in Woolloomooloo and Glebe, widows living alone are easily identifiable as people living in poverty, loneliness and a marginalised social location.[454] Malina and Rohrbaugh also identify the widow as a 'stereotypical example of dire vulnerability' and suggest the focus of the story is not so much the miraculous healing of the son, but the restoration of the mother, whose place in her first century community is 'reborn' when the son arises.[455] Focus on the restoration of

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453 Ibid.

454 For example in 1991 19.1% of the population in Woolloomooloo and Kings Cross were over 60 years old and lived alone (ABS 1991 Census).

455 Malina & Rohrbaugh, p. 330.

the widow as the key to understanding the story, is a similar focus of the ordinary readers.

No mention is made of Jesus' emotions which surface as a major factor in the ordinary readings. Tannehill does refer to pathos as a literary device used by Luke to increase the sympathy and suspense of the reader in the afflicted person.[456] But there is little consideration of the emotion of Jesus by Fitzmyer, Malina and Rohrbaugh or Tannehill, in the manner in which it surfaces in the ordinary reading groups. This emotion is particularly important in identifying the 'humanity' of Jesus for the Glebe reading group, an aspect of the story rarely discussed by the professional readers of the story.

The ordinary readers read the story as one of compassion, good news and welcome, while Fitzmyer in particular, and Ringe to a lesser extent, read it as a story of power and authority. Malina and Rohrbaugh, who make no allusion to the Elijah story, identify the widow's social location and read the story (in a similar manner to the ordinary readers), as one of restoration. Tannehill's recurrent focus on literary considerations appear to dominate any alternative consideration of the story. This focus locates Jesus in a prophetic tradition and the story as a good example of the author's use of pathos.

The ordinary readers appropriate the meaning of the story in their own social location and human experience, giving an ancient story new life. The enthusiasm with which the story is appropriated and read, invites the question, of what real relevance discussion of the Lukan intention to cast Jesus 'in the role of *Elias redivivus*' has for contemporary meaning? A focus on authorial literary strategies and intentions is not the focus of the ordinary readers. One can consider whether this focus does not rob the story of the resurrection life it celebrates.

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456 Tannehill, pp. 91-92.

On Audacious Worship

Luke 7: 36-50

Glebe Group Two[457]

The group identified three characters and noted that although there was no indication of how the sinful woman had gained access to the Pharisee's house. This did not require any explanation. There was no discussion as to why Jesus was having dinner in the Pharisee's house. The group noted the woman must have been prepared as she had a jar of ointment with her and that she then proceeded to weep and wipe her tears off the feet of Jesus with her hair. This was identified as a 'a lovely gesture'. The group also noted that Jesus' feet would have been dirty 'back then', before moving on to discuss the cynical response of the Pharisee and the story Jesus then tells.

Although there was some confusion with the final meaning of the parable, it was agreed that the person most in debt would be the most grateful once the debt had been cancelled. In response Jesus told the Pharisee 'he didn't do what the woman did do'. Jesus declares her faith has saved her. The group understood this faith had been displayed in her actions. Without wanting to focus on the confusion concerning the parable, I attempted to move the group forward with a open facilitation concerning the story's contemporary meaning. The response was to recast the story in a contemporary setting. The Pharisee was identified as 'decent right thinking people, conservative folks around today - possibly the Archbishop or a cardinal' and the woman as a 'prostitute from Kings Cross'. Jesus is located in the Archbishop's house at dinner when the women walks in and commences washing his feet. The improbability of such a thing happening provoked laughter. The cause of the improbability of this happening in the Archbishop's house was identified as the Archbishop's reluctance to 'learn a thing or two about what he

457 Volume Two, pp. 23 - 25.

assumes he already knows'. Jesus tells a story of people in debt and informs the Archbishop that he didn't do what the woman had done 'he thinks he's too powerful to do that - he thought it was beneath him'. The woman is contrasted to the Archbishop, as her actions were out of love for Jesus and she used all that she had, 'her tears and her hair'. This is identified by a reader as 'one of the classic examples of love what this woman did, you know that's love of the purest kind - unreserved love - I think this was a good woman - a great woman'.

The group concluded that the story was encouragement about not losing faith 'no matter who you are' and also that it was teaching about how to treat other people. The woman's act was discussed as an act of faith. One reader suggested it was an act of repentance, but it was agreed that this was not evident from the story. I asked if the group thought the story was shocking in any way. It was agreed that the story was shocking as it was 'very physical and emotional', 'not what you'd expect in an Archbishop's house' and because the woman in the story was a 'real risk taker'.

Women's Group Two[458]

An initial understanding of the meaning of the story was that Jesus forgives everyone - 'small or big sinners', and that the woman had to have had faith to do what she did. A comparison between Simon and the woman was drawn. Simon did not even show Jesus basic friendship or courtesy as an invited guest in his own house. The woman went well beyond 'just friendship and kindness' to express her love for Jesus in an 'extravagant' display of gratitude and care. It was suggested that she must have felt acceptance from Jesus to do what she did. In the face of grumbling Jesus forgives the woman her sins, 'and goes on regardless'.

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458 Ibid., pp. 187 - 189.

In response to my intervention 'what does it mean today?', the initial understanding was repeated. There is an inclusive welcome for all people no matter 'what they are'. The role reversal between a 'good Pharisee' and a woman 'known as a sinner' is identified as the 'upside down thing' about the story. The woman understands the needs of Jesus, but the Pharisee with all his knowledge of the religious laws and 'sinlessness' does not. The woman is therefore special. This led to the identification of another aspect of the story - Jesus welcomes sinners but religious people may not.

In response to my invitation to describe the story in a contemporary setting it was surprising that both groups chose to give the contemporary role of the Pharisee to the Archbishop (although it is not indicated by either group whether it is the Anglican or Catholic Archbishop). It is not as surprising that a sex -worker from Kings Cross is given the role of the female sinner, in view of the readers' geographical location in the heart of the red light district in Sydney. This may also be an assumption the readers have from previous discussion of the story in a church context. Again the concept of this story actually happening in such a location drew laughter. One reader suggested that it would cause great embarrassment, another that she would want to know why the women was acting in the way she was. Another suggested the woman wouldn't even get in the door of the Archbishop's house.

My intervention summarised what had been described and then I asked: 'is it socially acceptable today?'. The group agreed it would be no more acceptable then as it would be today, although the group drew a distinction between those who would want a simple explanation as 'a real believer', and those like Simon who 'just judge people'. I asked the group to describe what the woman's actions expressed to Jesus. I was interested in how the women in the group would describe the woman's action in the story. The group concluded that the woman shows Jesus respect through a very 'earthy' and 'sensual' activity that involved the giving of her whole self: 'Her body is involved. Her emotions are involved. Her

money's been involved . . . Everything about her is focused on him.' Her respect for Jesus was expressed through her actions, not her words.

My final intervention was guided in that I wanted to explore what this story might reveal to the readers about Jesus' attitude to women, as up to this point in the discussion the focus had been upon the attitude of the woman to Jesus. The group agreed that it meant Jesus had a special place for women. The woman acted upon her faith because she wanted forgiveness from Jesus, another distinction between the woman and the Pharisee who did not appear to want or feel the need for forgiveness. Jesus will forgive you, not 'just judge you', because it is not *who* you are (even a priest) but what you 'do' in the way you respond to Jesus that is important. It was noted that Jesus used the example of money to make a point to the Pharisee, on the basis that 'money spoke to the Pharisee', a rather clear example of eisegesis. The point was again stressed that it did not matter if one was rich or poor, went to church or not, the story clearly indicated Jesus' openness to everyone. The group concluded that the story was one of encouragement, and that 'the woman is used as an example of appropriate love in action'.

The final comment summarised the feelings of the women after their reading of the story: ' . . . it shows again that God has a special place for us because we are the bearers of life - we have to do so much more for life than men - so it makes sense that God shows us in Jesus that we are special to God - nothing against men, but this story is very strong! Jesus has a special place for women in his Kingdom. And we are not afraid like the woman in the story to go to Jesus - she was not frightened and so neither should we be.'

Analysis

Both ordinary reading groups identified the story as one of encouragement as Jesus shows forgiveness and acceptance to a woman who appears to be rejected

by those in religious power. The Woolloomooloo group identified what might be called a preferential option for women 'as the bearers of life' (undoubtedly following on from their discussion of verses 11-17), and also considered the story empowering, overcoming fear women might have in approaching Jesus. The 'fear' of approaching Jesus may reflect the patriarchal exclusion many women experience in both explicit and implicit ways in terms of church life and practice in Sydney. Both groups identified a welcome from Jesus to all people 'no matter who [or what] they are'. Both groups recast the story in a similar contemporary setting, reflecting their experience as marginalised in terms of those whom they perceived as powerful in the church.

The sinful woman was identified as a 'champion' for the cause of women, in the sense that she was a risk taker who approached Jesus without fear, and then proceeded to express her feelings for Jesus that included the use of her body, her possessions and her emotions. The woman was identified as a point of contrast with the Pharisee who (allegorically) represented a church leader, and also a person who by implication was wealthy. The victory for this 'champion' is when she is vindicated and forgiven by Jesus, which in turn was understood as a rebuke to the host Pharisee who had been rude to Jesus. The woman must have had faith to do what she did and this faith was rewarded at the end of the story by the forgiveness of sins.

There are a number of remarkable contrasts with Fitzmyer's interpretation of the story. Firstly Fitzmyer in view of the exegetical difficulties he identifies with verse 47, as does Tannehill[459] (although with different conclusions), suggests at the end of the story Jesus recognises the woman's state of forgiveness, rather than declaring her to be forgiven. Her forgiveness is the motivation for her actions. The women comes to Jesus as one already forgiven,[460] rather than the 'sinner' that the Pharisee identifies her as. Her actions of respect and love are primarily

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459 Fitzmyer, Vol. 1., p.692; cp. Tannehill, Vol. 1., pp. 117 - 118.
460 Ibid., p.687.

towards God, and in a secondary sense towards Jesus as God's agent. Jesus' statement in verse 50 regarding the woman's faith is not in reference to any action of the woman in the story, but 'supplies the motive that moved the woman in the first place' (it appears a place outside the story), ' . . . to seek forgiveness of her many sins'.[461] Although Fitzmyer describes this as a story 'of Jesus' pardon of a sinful woman', it appears that it should, he implies, be understood as a story of Jesus' recognition of a woman already pardoned. The tears of the woman are more likely tears of joy at the realisation of her forgiveness (rather than repentance for sin), and 'the tears are a caution for any interpretation of the scene that the love mentioned in it was intended in an erotic sense'.[462]

For the ordinary readers however the woman is a sinner with faith, expressing her love for Jesus who accepted her as she was, not as an already forgiven person.[463] The woman finds acceptance from Jesus even though she is a sinner, identified as the cause for Simon's offence.[464] The ordinary readers do not identify an exegetical problem with verse 47. Reading the story at face value the ordinary readers understand verse 47 to be directed to Simon. In conversation with Simon Jesus tells him that even though the woman is a sinner her sins are forgiven, and then confirms that by turning to the woman directly in verse 48 and announcing 'your sins are forgiven'.

Fitzmyer also suggests that Jesus' words to Simon may be startling but were not rude. Simon is 'after all Jesus' host'.[465] He also suggests that the parable is not told in order 'not so much' to contrast the deeds of the woman and Simon 'as to stress the amount of love manifested in them, and the implications of the amount

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461 Ibid.

462 Ibid., p.691.

463 Cp. Tannehill who attempts a more 'psychological' explanation: '. . . the woman could have experienced a love for Jesus which included faith in his power to redeem (cf.v.50) and gratitude for what he had done or would do for her . . . a person may experience all this and yet not know clearly what one is experiencing.' He suggests the story has a complex view of forgiveness, a complexity not identified by the ordinary readers. See p.118.

464 Cp. Malina & Rohrbaugh who suggest in the first century agrarian world Jesus would have become unclean in the understanding of Simon when he allowed public contact between himself and the woman.

465 Fitzmyer, Vol. 1., p.688.

of forgiveness both of them find in the sight of God'.[466] To this he adds that Simon's 'omissions' should not be understood as signs of impoliteness. Again the contrast with the ordinary readers, as well as the conclusions of Tannehill and Newsom and Ringe,[467] is evident. For the ordinary readers the woman is cast repeatedly in a contrasting role to Simon the Pharisee. In contemporary terms the Pharisee is identified as a somewhat arrogant church leader with a keen sense of awareness of money (if not one who is rich); while in the story he is identified as a bad host, cynical and unaccepting of sinners. The woman by contrast is expressive of love and gratefulness, who responds to Jesus in an appropriate way. She unmasks the presuppositions righteous people have about sinners. It is apparent that the woman in the story also crosses ecclesiological and class boundaries. The appropriateness of this is verified by Jesus' response to her - a response that contrasts sharply with that of the Pharisee (and contemporary church leaders).

The ordinary readings give rise to a sense of suspicion. In contrast to their readings Fitzmyer's version appears neatly to anaesthetise and sanitise the story. Simon appears polite.[468] Jesus is not rude. The woman is mistaken for a sinner, but is one already restored to God by forgiveness. Her contact with Jesus is as one forgiven rather than a sinner. Her actions are expressions of love and respect for Jesus as an 'agent' of God. Any hint of any other kind of emotion is rejected. Jesus and the woman must have known she was 'kosher' even though the polite (but socially inadequate?) Pharisee did not. Exegetical devices and Greek tense provide the 'scientific' tools to arrive at these conclusions. One cannot but feel that Fitzmyer's version of events would be very acceptable in an Archbishop's house. Any cause for offence is due to misunderstanding.

Ordinary readers read the story in its final form and did not refer to other Scripture or historical material. Their readings provide a useful tool for comparison with a

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466 Ibid., p.691.
467 Cp. Tannehill, p.95; Newsom & Ringe, p.286; Ringe, p. 109.
468 Note that Malina & Rohrbaugh identify him as 'respectful'.

reading of the story heavily dependent upon a redactional approach. Newsom and Ringe in The Women's Bible Commentary spend much time comparing the parallels in Matthew, Mark and John. They claim such a comparison is necessary to critique Luke's story.[469] In contrast to Fitzmyer, but with similarity to the women readers, Newsom and Ringe suggest it is the author's intention to portray the woman as a notorious sinner, and that her actions are emotionally extravagant, lavishly sensual and that her 'love has a strong erotic dimension'.[470] They refer to an unnamed male commentator who suggests that the woman exhibits a 'touch of hysteria' and that the woman is unable to express herself 'intellectually'. If that example indicates the diversity of the way in which the story is read it continues to invite the question to what extent does human experience, in this case gender experience, have upon the way in which a story like this is interpreted.

Continuing in their redactional approach Newsom and Ringe conclude that Luke has erased the prophetic role of the woman in his version of the story, rather casting the woman in a servant role of gratitude to Jesus, concluding this editing is a mark of Luke's arrogance (presumably as a male author).[471] This identification by Newsom and Ringe of the woman as a servant contrasts sharply with the identification of the woman by the ordinary readers as a risk-taker, a woman with a 'lot of guts', a 'champion', a great woman, an example to the readers about overcoming fear, and one that the story casts as 'special'.

For the professional women readers the actions of the woman in the story appear servile. For the ordinary readers, from a marginalised social and ecclesiological context, the actions of the woman are empowering. It is not improbable that social location and human experience shape the responses of both the professional and ordinary women readers at this point. One may even suggest that Newsom and Ringe have a professional agenda or ideological commitment to the exposure of the Lukan Jesus as patriarchal, casting women in servile and passive roles. This

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469 Newsom & Ringe, p.285.
470 Ibid., p. 286.
471 Ibid., p.286.

does not surface when ordinary women readers read the story, and take it at 'face value'. While this could be dismissed as a pre-critical response to the text, it does indicate that reading the story in its own right, without comparing it to other similar stories leads to an alternative focus and interpretation. This was valid for the ordinary readers who were able to appropriate the meaning forcefully within their own contexts.

Sharon Ringe's later reading of the story is somewhat modified in her commentary on Luke. The woman is identified not in a servant role 'for she does not act under orders' but motivated by her emotions, takes on the role of the 'host'.[472] Demonstrating respect and devotion she goes beyond mere water basin and towel, to use her own tears and hair in a scene that is sensuous, intimate and tender.[473] There is a closer fit with this later reading of Ringe's and women reading this story in the reading groups than that of her previous one.

Finally there is a significant fit between the understanding of forgiveness between the ordinary readers and that of Malina & Rohrbaugh and Ringe. This is the identification that forgiveness is understood to have the character of restoration, 'a return to self-sufficiency and one's place in society'.[474] For the ordinary readers the forgiveness given to the woman is a sign of restoration and the 'special place' women have in the Kingdom. This reading appears to be shaped by the ecclesial and social marginalisation of the readers, and the text is appropriated in liberative terms, suggesting these readers possess the critical skills to read their own locations of marginalisation, which in turn informs their appropriation of the text.

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472 Ringe, p.109.
473 Ibid.
474 Malina & Rohrbaugh, pp. 302-303; also Ringe, p. 111.

On Women

Luke 8:1-3

Glebe Group Two[475]

The group identified those travelling with Jesus as the 'twelve' and women who had been healed of evil spirits. The group noted that the women were supporting Jesus out of their own means. My first intervention, a guided facilitation, sought to focus the attention of the readers on the fact that women, as well as men, were travelling with Jesus. I was interested to see if the group thought the presence of women unusual or surprising. The group suggested that the presence of women was not particularly surprising, but interesting for two reasons. Firstly it depicted women outside their expected domestic roles, and secondly because they were not described as dependant, but were providing for the others with whom they were travelling out of their own means. It was also noted that it was surprising that at least one of the women had a rich husband and that it was assumed he had given her freedom to travel in this way. A question concerning which of the women named had been cured of demons was addressed. It was noted by the group that it depended upon how one read the sentence whether Joanna had been cured of demons or not. In response to my maintenance intervention about contemporary meaning, the group suggested that God's continued love and support required action - 'like the women in the story'.

Women's Group Two[476]

After identifying the characters, the group noted that 'many other women' or 'many others' were travelling with Jesus. Only twelve men were identified. After naming

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475 Volume Two, pp. 25 - 26.
476 Ibid., pp. 189 - 191.

specific women, the further reference to many other women could indicate that the women travelling with Jesus may have outnumbered the men.

These women were identified as demonstrating an 'open show of strength' in following Jesus, particularly Joanna, who had a husband 'in the enemy's camp', and who could have come under persecution for travelling with Jesus. That the women were providing out of their own resources: 'was amazing'. That some of the women had been cured and had then followed Jesus, rather than go their own way or return to their domestic situations was recognised positively, as well as the suggestion that Joanna must have given up 'material' things for something better.

My maintenance intervention: 'Where does it tell us that in the text?' attempted to focus the group on the text. The group noted that while this was not directly in the text, that it was probable in light of the position of Joanna's husband, hence she may have had to give something up. The group recognised Herod was not a good person from other readings and 'from history'. My third intervention requested the group to consider the contemporary meaning of the passage. Because the women were actually named rather than left out of the story all together, it was agreed the story was one of great hope for women struggling in the church today: 'we have the women here named in the text that we can recognise and get some hope from that. There was a woman's story right back then and we can learn a little bit of what that is, and for me it is most encouraging to be able to associate with these women named in the Gospels.'

My next intervention was a guided facilitation as I was interested in understanding whether the meaning of the story was located in the historical context, or if it had meaning without reference to history. The response acknowledged that the fact women were *not* excluded from the story *when* it was written, was of great importance. Another reader identified the presence of Mary Magdalene as significant, identifying Mary as a repentant prostitute. This prompted a further 'guided facilitation' attempting to establish where the reader had gained this

understanding of Mary Magdalene. The reader responded that history informed her that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. This prompted a further intervention attempting to discover whether the readers found the story to have meaning because they were informed by history of the significance of the characters, or whether meaning could be located synchronically in the text. The response is significant: 'Well I can't just look at it without taking that into account especially from my Catholic tradition and she is mentioned more than other women in the story and has more to do with Jesus than the others I think.'

My next two interventions attempted to focus the group on the contemporary meaning of the story. One reader noted that the contemporary meaning of the story was that one did not have to 'stay in a life of sin', as she could relate especially to Mary Magdalene and Susanna. Another reader concluded that the contemporary meaning of the story was about an equality of discipleship: 'The fact that these women are named and mentioned must mean that Jesus accepted them as equals to the twelve disciples. Here we see these women following Jesus as well and Jesus didn't tell them 'hey your place is in the home', he included them as part of his ministry and he accepted their contribution and their worth as part of his team, and it doesn't say it was not as much as the men. '

Analysis

Contemporary meaning for the Glebe group was understood in terms of a woman's responsibility to engage in reciprocal action in order to maintain God's continued love and support. Women following Jesus did not have 'a free ride'. The action of the women in the story pointed to a reciprocity between God and the women. God did God's bit and they should do theirs. The women were not identified as having a passive role in the process of travelling with Jesus, but were identified as making an active contribution to the journey. This translated directly into contemporary terms - women are still called to make an active contribution to the process of being Christian.

The Women's group appeared more consciously informed in their reading by their perceived marginalisation within their contemporary ecclesiological setting. Consequently the meaning of the story was identified as one empowering women, specifically because some were named in the story and as such their presence was historically preserved in the text. One particular contemporary outcome was that women are not, therefore, to be confined to the domestic sphere, and neither were they historically by Jesus.

The Glebe group were not as surprised that women were mentioned in the story as much as the fact that Joanna must have come from a wealthy background, and that she (possibly along with other women) must have had a tolerant husband to allow her to travel with Jesus in this way. This understanding of embededness of women within patriarchal control was not the result of historical awareness by the readers, but their contemporary experience. The implausibility of a women in Glebe or the women readers themselves obtaining such freedom, focussed their attention on the character of the male, rather than the role of the females in the text.

The influence of traditional church doctrine and teaching on a reader's interpretation is evident with at least one reader in the Women's group. The reader identified her Catholic tradition as providing her with an understanding of who Mary Magdalene was.[477] While there is little historical verification for this assumed role for Mary, this traditional identification of Mary combined with the identification of the reader herself with Mary, allowed the reader to identify a place for herself in the Christian journey, because Mary Magdalene was included in the original journey. This made her feel accepted and welcome. Contemporary self-identification with a mythical historical identification of Mary Magdalene produced positive results!

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477 Fitzmyer notes the association in Western church traditions of the identification, at least since the time of Gregory the Greta, the 'conflation' of the women in Luke 7: 36 - 50 identified as a sinner, with Mary Magdalene (and in other places with Mary of Bethany). He concludes there is no evidence for this in the New Testament itself, although it appears popular Roman Catholic teaching had passed this identification on convincingly to at least one adherent. See Vol. 1, p. 688.

Contemporary experience appears to focus the attention of the readers in the Women's group on liberative and empowering meaning in the story. It appears such a focus contrasts with professional women readers, for example Newsom and Ringe, who focus on oppressive patriarchal meaning in the text. This is most apparent with the interpretation provided by the Women's Bible Commentary.

Newsom and Ringe suggest these 'deceptively simple verses' raise many questions of which two are identified, the historical question and the redactional question. The women are either serving Jesus out of gratitude for being healed, or are 'wealthy' women included in the story to serve a Lukan purpose, primarily that of casting women in a 'non reciprocated role of service or support of the males of the movement'.[478] When dealing with history the authors raise quite speculative questions, for example, did the women's travel constitute day trips, rather than travelling 'on the road' with Jesus? They suggest that if the women were behaving scandalously 'why did the scandal leave no mark on the tradition, and why was the practice never explicitly defended?'.[479] Identifying the Jesus movement as a movement of poor people, wealthy women 'are shown aiding the poor (disciples and Jesus), but as patrons from outside their ranks.'[480] In view of other Lukan passages containing Jesus' teaching on matters of wealth and poverty, they suggest the women exemplify the behaviour of 'sell your possessions and give alms' and hence reach two further conclusions: the first that 'Luke's depiction of a female-supported, male-led organisation has been mirrored down the centuries by many Christian organisations,' and secondly that the women in Luke-Acts 'are inadvertently described as supporting a non-egalitarian system that subordinates and exploits them'.[481] There is little fit between these conclusions and those of the ordinary readers. While interpretative devices and critical tools may provide one reason, the purpose in reading the story by Newsom and Ringe requires some attention. Some women read the story in order to find liberative and empowering

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478 Newson & Ringe, p. 287.
479 Ibid.
480 Ibid.
481 Ibid., p. 288.

meaning. Others perhaps are more motivated to look for signs of patriarchal oppression. A hermeneutic of suspicion must inform any reading of Gospel texts, but it also appears the same hermeneutic of suspicion may be applicable to those employing such an approach themselves.

The most common fit between the ordinary readers and the professional readers is the identification that the women in the story are portrayed as operating outside accepted Jewish roles in the first century.[482] While there is common agreement amongst professional readers that the women travelling with Jesus were operating outside their normal Jewish role, each ascribes to the story a different meaning. Fitzmyer identifies the presence of women in the story as serving the Lukan concern to have Galileans witnessing the ministry of Jesus.[483] Fitzmyer notes Jesus 'tolerating them [women] among his followers'[484] does disassociate him from early rabbinical writings and attitudes (for example *Pirqe 'Abot* 1:5), and from such sentiments expressed in John 4:27. He suggests Luke 'makes' the women 'provide for' or 'minister to' the Twelve, as well as Jesus, for a reason. It is a mechanism to distinguish the women from the Twelve, because a criterion, amongst others, for membership of the Twelve is: 'he must be a man'.[485] In spite of this exclusion Fitzmyer notes their role is surprising 'for their day', and their mention at this point in the Gospel foreshadows their later witness to the cross and the empty tomb, and the awaiting of the Spirit in Acts 1:14. Fitzmyer notes the suggestion of one scholar, that the inclusion of this narrative, along with 7:11-17 and 7:36-50 might have 'constituted at one time a narrative complex, reflecting a *Sitz im Leben* in the early community's concern about the question of women' as one which is too problematic to give anything but a 'speculative' answer to.[486]

While Tannehill agrees that women travelling with Jesus would be in conflict with traditional roles in first century Jewish society, the role they are given, Tannehill

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482 So Tannehill, p. 138; Fitzmyer, Vol. 1., p. 696; Malina & Rohrbaugh, p. 334.
483 Fitzmyer, Vol. 1., p. 696.
484 Ibid.
485 Fitzmyer, p. 616; so Acts 1: 21 - 22.
486 Ibid., p. 696.

concludes, probably meant that of supplying and preparing the daily need for food. This was a traditional female role, but '. . . there is no suggestion here that women should avoid traditional roles in order to demonstrate their new freedom. It is a role dignified by the fact that Jesus also performs it, urging the apostles to follow his example (22:26-27).'[487] Significant agreement appears between the Women's group and Tannehill who conclude 'discipleship of women is conceived as radically as for men - perhaps even more radically, since women of that time were very closely bound to the family - involving a sharp break with social expectations and normal responsibilities.'[488] It is significant that the Women's group when considering the crucifixion and resurrection narratives identify, in similar fashion to Tannehill, a strong significance that some of the women in this story are also present at the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Working within their reconstructed first century social script, Malina and Rohrbaugh note that travel for women other than for conventional activities, for example religious feasts, visiting family, or business,[489] would have been considered deviant. Women leaving behind family responsibilities would have been considered seriously deviant, arousing suspicions of illicit sexual conduct. However Malina and Rohrbaugh make no further comment on this aspect of the story, suggesting alternatively that as the women named are all said to have been healed by Jesus, the fact that they travel with Jesus rather than returning to their proper places within their own communities implies reciprocity. That is in providing support for Jesus they were paying off a 'debt' incurred when they were healed. Alternatively they suggest that the women may have been widows, although there is no textual support of this assertion. This reciprocity is an aspect of the story noted by the Glebe group. However the Glebe group identify this act of reciprocity as an active female part in the relationship, rather than mere passive compliance with social convention.

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487 Tannehill, p.138.

488 Ibid.

489 Malina & Rohrbaugh, p. 334. Women travelling for business appears somewhat anachronistic.

Sharon Ringe appears to have modified her interpretive stance since her work on this text in the Women's Bible Commentary. She notes that the story retains the women's names - 'itself an unusual detail, given women's usual anonymity and virtual invisibility in the writing of the ancient world.'[490] Ringe comments that the moral character of the women is defined by their faithful accompaniment of Jesus, rather than demon possession or their socially deviant actions. Ringe's conclusion, after noting that the women in Luke are present with Jesus from the beginning of his journey through to the crucifixion, fits significantly with the Women's group. She concludes: 'Their eventual marginalisation in the leadership of the church seems to reflect the customs and social world of the emerging Christian communities rather than any exclusionary policy of Jesus.'[491]

Ordinary readers were shaped by extra-textual material, whether from traditional church teaching or historical sources. The significance of history was more influential for the Women's group than the Glebe group. A recurrent source of empowerment for the ordinary readers was the retention of the names of the women in the text. This suggested a significant role for women as the first followers of Jesus, a role that centuries of tradition and practice has obscured. The ordinary readers understood the story to be one of the active portrayal and participation of women rather than a passive one. Informed by their contemporary situation, the Women's group found these three verses not deceptive, but a glimpse of the equality of discipleship that existed in the first century Jesus movement.

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490 Ringe, p. 112.
491 Ibid.

On Men, Power and Violence.

Luke 9:43-56

Women's Group Three[492]

The women in Reading Group Two had requested to meet again to consider how men were portrayed in the text, and what contemporary meaning might be identified in stories about men in the gospel of Luke.

The group identified the disciples as 'afraid and dull', and seemingly unaffected by the pain of Jesus in foreshadowing his betrayal in verses 43b - 45. They appear, in light of verses 46 - 48, preoccupied with the question of who is the greatest. The group discussed what it was in terms of the disciples own 'humanness' that concealed what Jesus was saying to them. The cause of this concealment was identified as 'undealt with issues' of self-perception by the disciples, their own self limitations and lack of perceptiveness. They were 'fearful and not very wise in terms of understanding'.

This lack of self perception is apparent in their argument about who was the greatest. This behaviour was identified as 'an incredibly selfish response'. It was agreed the inclusion of a child as an example of what really constituted greatness was appropriate, as people in general, and the disciples in particular, would not consider a child to be 'great'.

One reader suggested, referring to the parallel passage in Matthew that Jesus was making himself the child. My intervention sought to clarify what this meant. Reference was made to Matthew 18 verse 5, where Jesus says 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me'. This was identified as a 'different type of greatness' to that being discussed by the disciples. Reference

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492 Volume Two, pp. 210 - 215.

was made again to Matthew, identifying chapter 25 as support for the suggestion that Jesus was identifying with the child as an example of greatness: 'making himself the least, which is a sign of greatness'. It was agreed by the group that the disciples would not appear able to embrace, or be comfortable with, this type of humility. This humility however, is 'greatness' in the eyes of God.

A open facilitation led to discussion of verses 49 - 50. After identifying the basic content of the episode, my intervention focussed this discussion on the way in which the male characters in the story were portrayed. The response of the disciples was credited to their self understanding as the 'important' ones, and their desire to maintain group boundaries by excluding others. John appeared to make the assumption that the disciples were the only ones who could use the name of Jesus. In light of their contemporary experience, the group noted how boundaries are used to create divisions amongst Christians, and how in the direct experience of two of the women working with prostitutes,[493] they had been criticised by other Christians for working outside acceptable church boundaries. This in turn led to discussion about the inclusion of a volunteer group at Sunday Morning Street Church.[494]

Again my intervention promoted the forward movement of the group to consider the story in verses 51- 56. Following brief discussion concerning the basic plot of the story the group focussed on a footnote (contained in the NRSV text being used), that indicated some versions of this story included what appeared to the group to be a most significant part of the text. That this was excluded from the main story raised the issue of whose responsibility it was for making a decision about including or excluding parts of a story in the text. The group continued to discuss the story without finalising an answer to this question. It was agreed however, that the response of Jesus to James and John in this 'footnote', 'clearly

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493 Two of the readers were women Outreach Workers in the Women's Space for Sex Workers Project employed by Baptist Inner City Ministries.

494 At least one member of the group is a regular volunteer at Sunday morning Street Church where breakfast and worship is shared with 150 - 200 homeless people in Tom Uren Place in Woolloomooloo.

identifies what Jesus is on about'. My open facilitations that followed focused the group once more on the role of the disciples, particularly James and John, and how they are portrayed in the story.

The group's response included a good deal of laughter and some 'uproar' as the group considered the behaviour of the disciples. Variously described as hot headed, assuming they could act like God, abusing power, identifying violence as an appropriate response, James and John, it was concluded, did not understand Jesus. This was identified as a disturbing aspect of the story as James and John had been travelling with Jesus for some time.

My next intervention promoted consideration of how Jesus was portrayed in the story. The group agreed that Jesus was identified as non-violent, choosing not to use a destructive option, an option he would have had the power to exercise. While non-violent Jesus is portrayed as assertive with his disciples, rebuking them, and not the villagers. He is 'much more able to forgive' and show acceptance towards others. The story's meaning was summarised as 'the whole point is to save lives not to destroy them'.

My final intervention was a guided facilitation. I was interested to see if the group could now summarise the way in which the disciples had been characterised in the stories that the group had read. The group concluded the male characters, other than Jesus, had been portrayed as vain, self centred, after power, competitive, afraid, emotionally unbalanced, aggressive and 'pretty stupid'. Guided intervention focussed the group on whether this was an expected portrayal of the disciples or one which did not fit with what they had been taught in their various traditions. Two significant responses require attention. Firstly one reader from a Catholic tradition (an Aboriginal woman raised on a Catholic mission), clearly identified that this portrayal contradicted the way in which her tradition portrayed the disciples 'as clean cut young men' and 'apostles in stained glass windows' even 'with halos'. This was the first time this reader had read these stories. She

indicated that if she told these stories to her daughter she would have to clarify who the men were, as it would not be self-evident from the stories that they were the 'apostles'. Secondly the contrast identified by the group, between the portrayal of men in these stories, and the portrayal of women in the stories they had read in the previous women's group was self evident: 'none of the women we read about come across like any of these men. No indeed. Great was their faith wasn't it!'

Glebe Group Two[495]

The group agreed the opening story recounted how Jesus attempted to prepare his disciples for what was ahead, warning he would be 'handed over to the hands and the power of men'. The disciples don't understand and 'don't want to either'. Their fear is contrasted with their argument over 'who is the best'. This behaviour was identified to be 'like sibling rivalry'. The disciples focused on the issue of power and who had the most power. The group identified that issues of power were 'everywhere' in their contemporary experience, including the church.

This stood in contrast to Jesus' idea of greatness and what God considers great: 'the lesser you are, the greater you are in God's eyes'. The example of a child was appropriate, as children, both in the original story and the reader's contemporary experience, are not valued in 'power' terms.

My maintenance intervention concerning contemporary meaning elicited the reader's conclusion, that 'greatness' does not equate with power, prestige or money, but; for God, it is found in the 'most lowly and humble'.

The disciples in the story in verses 49-50, were identified as having 'some cheek' in view of the fact they wanted to stop someone outside 'their denomination' from exorcising demons, when the disciples, it was recalled by the group, could not exorcise the demon in the story in verses 37 - 43. The motivation for the disciples

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495 Volume Two, pp. 39 - 42.

behaviour was 'envy, jealousy, malice and pride'. This assumed elitism by the disciples is rebuked by Jesus. The group concluded that in contemporary terms it was clear that differences between denominations and their doctrines should be dissolved through the recognition that they all 'worship the same God even if they get to their conclusions in a different way'.

At the next meeting of the group the story of Jesus and the disciples in the Samaritan village was read. It was noted that the story ended abruptly, although later in the reading process[496] when the footnote to verse 56 was discovered, the group agreed that this inclusion rounded out the story and 'ended' it appropriately. The comment was made 'maybe we need to get it out of the footnotes and back in the story'.

The readers focused on the cause of the rejection of Jesus and attributed this to racism. A suggestion that Jesus was rejected because he was on the way to be crucified was rejected as too 'spiritualised'. James and John were identified as being interested in 'quick revenge' by 'calling down the fires - nuke 'em'. The contemporary parallel between this action and nuclear weapons was made immediately, and the activity of Jesus identified as one which rejected violence as a response to racism: '. . . lands today that are in war over racial issues from Africa to Ireland . . . Jesus says this is not the way to deal with the problem'. The same conclusion was drawn for individuals. In the face of contemporary rejection and racism the appropriate response was to move on to another place. It was acknowledged however that this was a difficult thing to do.

Analysis

The concept of the disciple's self-limitations as the source of their fear and lack of understanding, reflects a contemporary understanding of self, especially as understood by readers working in the welfare or counselling sector. This lack of

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496 Ibid., pp. 43.

understanding is viewed as having a human cause. Tannehill notes the number of scholars who attribute this lack of understanding not to human cause but to God.[497] Such an understanding of God's involvement does not surface in the ordinary reading groups.

Abuse of power and competition over 'who was the best' was identified as present in as diverse groups from the media to the church. Men were considered more prone to competition as they are still the majority of people in Australian business and positions of leadership. The social location of children was accepted as both an historical and contemporary example of humility, weakness and vulnerability.[498] A reader in the Women's group referred to Matthean passages to support the idea that Jesus was identifying with the child and as such, with the 'least'. Acceptance of the child in Jesus' name was acceptance of the least, and therefore Jesus. Being the 'least' was a new form of greatness. This agrees with Tannehill and Ringe.[499] Fitzmyer appears to fall short of such an identification. He suggests the story insists on humility in 'inner -community relationships', and that the child is taken as a sign of 'lowliness'. Jesus 'associates' himself with the child, rather than identifying himself with the child.[500] However no fit occurs between the ordinary readers identification of the child as the 'least' and Tannehill's rather speculative suggestion that the exorcist of the following story is an example of the 'least', or 'the child who must be received'.[501]

The Glebe group understood the teaching of Jesus concerning greatness to cross social and class boundaries. They identify a reversal. What contemporary society identifies as indicators of greatness - power, prestige and money - are not indicators of greatness in the eyes of God. Alternatively the greatness that God looks for is to be found in the lowly and humble.

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497 Tannehill, p. 227; cp. Fitzmyer, Vol. 1, p. 816.
498 Cp. Malina & Rohrbaugh, p. 383.
499 See Ibid., p. 255, and Ringe who suggests 'Jesus places himself in the position of a child', p. 144.
500 Fitzmyer, Vol. 1, pp. 816 - 817.
501 Tannehill, p. 228.

Both groups identified contemporary division in Sydney between denominations as inappropriate in light of Jesus' response to the one casting out demons in his name, and who was not part of his immediate group. This was particularly relevant to those in the Women's group, who had received criticism from conservative churches regarding their work with prostitutes and their involvement in a needle-exchange program. This reflects the ecclesial boundaries conservative evangelicals draw around 'appropriate' church activity in the Sydney context. This was apparent in the response of one reader: 'I suppose it is the same when Christians criticise us for working with the people we do. They don't see us as part of the formal traditional church organisation. We are a bit different, so I suppose the reply is - you can do work for Jesus, we don't all have to be in the same group'. Contemporary meaning was also identified through the inclusive practice of the Sunday morning Street Church in Woolloomooloo[502], where all are welcome.

There are similarities between the Women's group and the campesinos in their reading of Luke 9: 49 - 50.[503] The story was read with enthusiasm as correcting 'church' teaching, restricting Christians associating with people who are not part of the 'church'. This related particularly to those outside the church who are engaged in social work or making 'great revolutions' or 'miracles'.[504] The campesinos concluded that 'Jesus here presents his church as very extensive'.[505] From the experience of the campesinos, those included in this 'church' were 'people who are driving evil out of the world', which for at least one member of the group included Communists, who use the name of freedom.[506] The ordinary readers, and the campesinos, all criticise the boundaries which they identify the churches erect in their own contemporary contexts.

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502 Sunday Morning Street Church is an activity of Baptist Inner City Ministries, combining breakfast for homeless men and women and worship in a setting and manner developed by homeless people in consultation with BICM staff.

503 Cardenal, Vol. 3, pp. 9 - 13.

504 'Here Christ tells us that anyone that works for the cause of others is on the side of us Christians.', Ibid., p. 9.

505 Ibid.., p. 13.

506 Ibid.., p. 11.

It is interesting to note Fitzmyer's suggestion that the story enhances the power associated with the name of Jesus, as it could be used by an 'outsider' with such results. No ordinary reader identified this Christological nuance.[507]

The response of Jesus to James's and John's reaction to the Samaritans also found contemporary application. In the Women's group this application took on a political dimension as non-violence was seen as appropriate in terms of tension between Iran and America. The Glebe group identified racism as the basis for the Samaritan's response to Jesus. This was apparent to them from the story, with little historical material to instruct them, although discussion of the historical role of Samaritans had surfaced before in the reading group.

Of significance to both ordinary reading groups is the textual variation in verse 56. This textual variation is welcomed and understood as contributing to the overall meaning of the story in a significant manner. This raised the issue of what factors determine its exclusion or inclusion from the text. Fitzmyer concludes it is 'suspect', as it was omitted from the earlier manuscripts.[508] Tannehill, Ringe, Malina and Rohrbaugh make no mention of it.

For the professional readers of the text the interpretative key to the passage appears to be verse 51, identified as the beginning of the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. Only the ordinary readers identify the behaviour of Jesus in his reaction to the suggestion of James and John as non-violent. Fitzmyer suggests the story stresses the resolute determination of Jesus to make his way to Jerusalem. 'Nothing is to distract him from what has been determined'.[509] Such a feature of the story does not surface in either reading groups. Fitzmyer, like the majority of scholars,[510] connects the desire of John and James to 'call down fire

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507 Fitzmyer, Vol. 1., p. 820.
508 Ibid.., p. 830.
509 Ibid., p.827.
510 For example :Tannehill, p. 230; Ringe, p. 149.

from heaven' with 2 Kings 1:10 or 12 and with Luke 7: 8-22, to conclude that Jesus rejects here any identification of himself with Elijah 'the fiery reformer'. The suggestion of James and John is described as a desire for 'zealous punishment'. This Jesus primarily rejects due to his desire to proceed to Jerusalem, and in a secondary sense through what Fitzmyer describes as an exemplification of the teaching of the sermon on the plain, particularly Luke 6:29.

Tannehill identifies two reasons why the response of James and John is rejected. Firstly as correction of an abuse of power by the disciples. Secondly in order to distinguish Jesus from Elijah, who is used as both a prototype and antitype for the Lukan Jesus.[511] Ringe suggests that motivation for the reaction of Jesus to James' and John's suggestion, is to endorse and follow his own teaching to the disciples in chapter 9 verse 5, to move on in the face of rejection.[512] Malina and Rohrbaugh simply note the suggestion received a rebuke from Jesus, but do not attempt to identify the motivation for this rebuke.[513]

The non-violent reaction of Jesus to rejection and racism is the interpretive key for the ordinary readers, who only recognise in passing the commencement of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Non-violent response to contemporary conflicts (between America and Iran, and in countries identified 'from Africa to Ireland' engaged in racial wars) was identified as the meaning of the story. Intertextual considerations, or consideration of the more 'spiritual' aspect of Jesus journeying to his destiny in Jerusalem, were not apparent to the ordinary readers. It does seem appropriate to consider to what extent such critical considerations mask the plain meaning of the text, which the ordinary readers appear to understand in light of their contemporary experience.

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511 Tannehill, p. 230.

512 Ringe, p. 149.

513 Malina & Rohrbaugh, p. 344. Note Malina and Rohrbaugh interpret the story as a 'reversal of expected status rules still not understood', within the reading scenario of 'honour-shame societies'. The rejection of Jesus by the Samaritans is in response to his intention only to pass through, and not to 'hold up there'.

For the Women's group, recognition that the disciples of Jesus were portrayed with such negative characteristics in the stories led to surprise and suspicion about why the disciples are given a different character role in dominant church tradition. It was also noted how the disciples contrasted, in terms of negative character portrayal, with women who were cast in a much more positive light. This recognition provokes a sense of suspicion concerning the patriarchal use of the text, and how the disciples have been promoted in church tradition, with women relegated to a lesser position.[514]

The ordinary readers read the text as they had it. There was minor textual comparison to arrive at what they considered the plain meaning of the stories. Contemporary experience shaped and informed their reading. However, it is apparent that dominant church tradition did not confine the Women's group in arriving at new insights into the behaviour of the disciples in the story. These new insights for the readers then became the perspective from which dominant church teaching about the disciples could be questioned.

514 Tannehill does consider the disciples defects as a major Lukan theme; pp. 253 -274.

On Mercy and Politics

Luke 10: 25 - 36

Surry Hills Group[515]

The group recognised this text as a well known and well read parable, and agreed to read it once more in case there might be some new insight. After the audible reading of the parable, a member of the group suggested that the parable be retold in a contemporary setting. The parable was located in Kings Cross and Woolloomooloo. The victim was identified as a women. The first person to find her was identified as a Baptist minister. The Levite was identified as a Solicitor. The Samaritan was identified as an Aboriginal. The woman was taken by the Aboriginal to Matthew Talbot, a local hostel for homeless men, and the Aboriginal supported her needs from his pension cheque. The Aboriginal was identified as showing mercy.

The impact of retelling the parable in a contemporary setting was noted by the group. Indigenous people, like Samaritans, it was suggested, were socially unacceptable and victims of racial abuse. No comment was made to justify this association. It was assumed the role of the Samaritan in the story was a socially unacceptable one and pointed to racial tension. This character role must have been understood from previous readings in church bible study groups. The readers also noted how stereotypes of Aboriginal people in Australian church and society, were broken by local Aboriginal people in Woolloomooloo. This was apparent in the way in which they cared for others in Woolloomooloo, while mainstream 'church' people had for many years ignored the needs of people in locations like Woolloomooloo.

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515 Volume Two, pp. 141 - 142.

It was concluded that the parable taught that belief and practice or faith and the practice of that faith must go together. Faith must not just be an interior experience but also be visible in appropriate actions as well. One reader noted how the parable was a clear 'this worldly example' of how one would inherit eternal life. The reversal of social and religious roles in the parable was discussed. The hero of the story was one normally identified as hopeless, unclean and socially unacceptable. Two final comments by the readers were significant. Firstly the confrontative nature of the story, both in its original as well as contemporary context was noted. Secondly the process of 'telling the story *for us today*, has allowed a well-known text to be heard again in our context, and it is a powerful teaching of what it means to be Christian today'.

I was stimulated by the discussion to intervene with a clear personal agenda. I was interested, in view of the priority and emphasis given to evangelism and *sola fide* by conservative evangelicals in Sydney, whether members of the group conceived the possibility that this passage could be used by modern evangelists in order to explain how a person became a Christian and inherited eternal life. The group agreed they had never heard the passage used that way. An emphasis was retained by one reader in the group on interior belief as a priority, noting however that the parable combined interior faith with a love of neighbour that required exterior practice. Alternatively one reader suggested the parable taught that assisting someone who was drunk in Woolloomooloo was the essence of being a Christian, and an action that expressed love of God. The emphasis on love of God, it was noted, was an emphasis in Sydney churches that was given much attention to the detriment of love of neighbour and self. Consideration that love of God and neighbour included love of self, led the group to inquire what type of experience one would have as the victim left by the side of the road, and ignored by the church.

Glebe Group Two[516]

The group knew the parable well, and suggested the parable was about love of neighbour. As the parable was well known, the group agreed the meaning was plain and straight forward, and was prepared to move on to discussion of the verses that followed.

My guided intervention suggested that the group retell the parable in their own context. I was interested to see if retelling the parable in contemporary terms would lead to any new insights for the readers. I was also aware of how significant this process had been for the Surry Hills group, who had read the parable some three weeks earlier.

The group's response identified different contemporary characters and a somewhat different hero to that of the Surry Hills group. The victim was robbed of his designer label runners by 'young hoods' in order to finance their drug needs. Half dead, the victim is encountered by 'a big big member of the church hierarchy'. The Levite is identified as a wealthy person from an exclusive suburb, visiting a restaurant in Glebe. The Samaritan, initially identified as a poor person, eventually is identified as a Muslim - a person from an ethnic and non-Australian religious background. The group concluded that Jesus said the Muslim was the one who showed mercy and that we should do likewise.

Following the retelling of the parable I inquired again what contemporary meaning it might have for the group. The meaning was summarised as instruction to respond to a person in need. In order to understand why the group had identified a Muslim as the 'hero' of the story I asked why Jesus would use the example of such a person to make the point. It was agreed it was because such people are marginalised and 'put down by society'. I repeated my initial question with the same interest, to which one reader responded: 'because I believe Jesus was a

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516 Ibid., pp. 45 - 48.

real socialist - a Christian socialist - the first real Christian socialist - I believe he was.'

I inquired of the reader what she meant by Christian socialist. Jesus was understood to be a Christian socialist because of his empathy and concern for the outcasts of society, the lowly, the poor, and 'the down at heel', even though he could have associated and been more concerned with people from 'better' classes in society.

I was interested to pursue how the group understood the political nature of this parable and Jesus' activity generally. The group acknowledged that Jesus did act in the political arena of life, and noted that such a conclusion would cause difficulty 'for a good Sydney Anglican'. I was interested to establish from the group what political beliefs Christian socialism included. These were identified as 'giving everybody a fair go' and 'an equal start', which appeared to mean equal access to housing, medicine, education and an income that allows people to have enough to eat. It was also being tolerant, assisting people even if we don't understand them, accepting people from other ethnic backgrounds and treating those less well off than ourselves humanly or with dignity.

I inquired if these conclusions had anything to say about the Federal budget tabled in Parliament by the Conservative Liberal Party the previous Tuesday evening. The budget was identified as the opposite to the Christian socialism that Jesus founded. It was a budget that discriminated against the elderly, those in public housing, those suffering from HIV and AIDS, those on medical benefits and pensions.

My final intervention was interpretive, summarising what the group was saying. The Government of the day was acting contrary to the teaching of the parable. This led to the conclusion: 'that's why we have identified Jesus as the first Christian socialist'.

Retelling the parable in the readers' contemporary context enhanced the parable's meaning for both reading groups. Local context, local geography and contemporary issues in the lives of the readers, for example, the question of faith and works, politics, the relationship between rich and poor, contact between the upper and lower classes, all surfaced as the meaning of the parable was appropriated.

The contemporary roles allocated to the characters in the parable, directly influenced and shaped the reader's interpretation of the parable. This appears contrary to the Sharon Ringe's conclusion that it is the 'drama' of the story, rather than the characters, that conveys the parable's meaning: 'For them [Luke's own audience] as for us - and for Jesus' audience as well - the drama of the story rather than its cast of characters conveys its meaning and confronts the question "who is my neighbour?"'.[517]

Ringe's conclusion appears questionable in light of the reading of the parable by ordinary readers. It also begs the question as to why Ringe arrives at this conclusion, especially after she has entered into an extensive discussion of who the characters *were*. It appears possible that the lack of agreement amongst those who seek to reconstruct the characters in their historical setting, and the number of possibilities entertained for each character and how they were perceived by the original audience propels Ringe to this conclusion. Contemporary reconstruction of the parable clearly identifies character roles which are recognisable to the readers and become crucial to the parable's meaning. This clarity for ordinary readers highlights the difficulties encountered by professional readers attempting to establish the meaning of the parable in terms of authorial intention and meaning for the original audience.

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517 Ringe, p. 159.

Ringe suggests that if Jesus' audience is originally the lawyer, all the characters in the parable would have been understood in a negative role, and the entire story distasteful. The victim, like the Samaritan, would have been identified as a trader - a despised occupation. The victim would also have been a source of contamination, naked and apparently dead. The lawyer in turn, identified as a Pharisee, would also have found the priest and Levite, associated with the temple and its cult, as negative characters, as Pharisees were in conflict with the priestly classes. Inn keepers were a despised group, and the robbers despised and to be feared by the lawyer.

When the original audience is expanded to include others than the lawyer, Ringe suggests the negative role of the robbers could change and they would have been received with sympathy as they acted against, albeit as terrorists, the rich exploitation of the poor. Ringe then turns to Luke's own audience and suggests that the Samaritan would continue to be despised due to ethnic tensions, while temple officials, like the priest and the Levite, would have been an anachronism, at most symbolically representing religious leaders. Whether this role would have been received positively or otherwise receives no comment. Robbers would have been understood as robbers, and the victim would be the only character to raise human empathy.[518]

Malina and Rohrbaugh alternatively suggest that the parable was addressed to an original audience of peasants, who would have been sympathetic to the robbers, but would have despised both the victim and the Samaritan. Both would have been identified as traders, a despised occupation. The Levite and the priest would have been held in high esteem in terms of purity and the holiness code. Identifying these characters' roles and social locations they note a surprising end to the parable, with the 'compassionate action of one stereotyped as a scurrilous thief'. Little is said about what meaning this surprise ending has, as the use of the

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518 Ibid.

parable by Jesus is understood within the scenario of challenge-riposte. As such it is a smart manoeuvre on the part of Jesus engaged in first century 'challenge-riposte' with the expert in Torah legality. One can inquire if an audience assumed that the robbers were the heroes of the story, that is, peasants who had lost their land and who were striking back at feared elite landowners, what becomes of the central role of the Samaritan? Who in the audience would care about the victim, or that the Samaritan decide to help him? In fact if the audience had sympathy for the robbers at the expense of the victim, the Samaritan would hardly be identified as showing mercy. At worst or best he would be acting either unnecessarily to aid a rich person, or simply be one despised person helping another. Thus the story loses much of its impact. This historical explanation of the story appears to also rob the parable of any real meaning for contemporary readers.

Tannehill spends little time analysing the characters although he does suggest that the role given to the lawyer, the priest and the Levite, is consistent with Lukan portrayal of religious leaders in a negative light.[519] Tannehill suggests it is a parable of 'active concern for others which ignores social and religious barriers'.[520] Not so for Fitzmyer, who suggests (and I assume he is reconstructing the roles in light of his perceived first century audience) the priest and the Levite are not the objects of criticism or scorn in terms of their love of God.[521] It is their love of neighbour that is put to the test. The Samaritan is cast in a role as a 'foil' to the two respected members of the Palestinian Jewish community, who in turn would have regarded the Samaritan as a pagan.[522] For Fitzmyer it is a parable of mercy.[523]

With the variety of possible original audiences, identified by professional readers, also comes a variety of character roles. In light of this uncertainty, it may be prudent to focus on the drama of the story as conveying the meaning of the

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519 Tannehill, p. 179.
520 Ibid.
521 Fitzmyer, Vol 2, p. 884.
522 Ibid., p. 887.
523 Ibid., p.883.

parable, a drama somehow dislocated from the characters and their roles within the drama. However to dissolve the role of the characters in light of historical uncertainty about their roles perceived by the original audience or the author's intention into a meaningless aspect of the parable, is not required when contemporary readers read the parable within their own contemporary context. Alternatively, *how* the characters are understood, and whether their roles are negative or positive, has direct bearing on the way in which the meaning of the parable is appropriated.

The campesinos in Solentiname cast the characters in their own context, in similar fashion to the ordinary readers in Surry Hills and Glebe. For the campesinos, the Nicaraguan people are the victim, religious people are those who ignore the needs of the victim, while the Samaritan of the parable is the atheists who are the revolutionaries, the 'good comrades'.[524] In similar fashion to the Glebe group, the campesinos find political meaning in the story. Such meaning is vaguely alluded to by Tannehill, but receives no consideration from the professional scholars consulted. Both groups also suggest that dominant religious groups would not accept their interpretation of the meaning. Here both groups reject the dominant church teaching of their context that focuses exclusively on the spiritual aspects of the gospel. They also understand that the behaviour of the Samaritan, in their various contemporary contexts either as revolutionaries, an Aboriginal or a Muslim, stand in direct contrast to those whom society consider to be the righteous or the successful.

In the Glebe and Surry Hills groups, class consciousness clearly shapes how the parable is interpreted, through roles allocated to the Levite in particular. There is close fit with the widely held view that the contrast between the priest and the Levite as representatives of the Jewish establishment, and the despised

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524 Cardenal, Vol. 3, p. 99.

Samaritan's enthusiasm to engage in acts of mercy, is a major point to the parable.[525]

Contemporary readers arouse suspicion with their political appropriation of the parable. This is not so evident with professional readers. This suspicion provokes the question as to why this parable has not been identified as a subversive text, calling into question both contemporary political and church leaders in the manner which surfaces in the way in which ordinary readers read this parable.

525 So Esler, Community and Gospel p. 119.

On Women in Roles

Luke 10: 38 - 42

Glebe Group Two[526]

The confusion by one of the readers with the story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11:1-44, due to the presence of Mary and Martha, reminded the group of the necessity of a careful reading of the story.

In the reading process I contributed three interventions, the first the usual maintenance intervention reminding the group our focus was the meaning of the story for contemporary experience. My second guided intervention attempted to explore with the readers whether or not they did perceive the story as relating to 'female' roles, with the third intervention a follow on question about female roles in contemporary experience.

Only women in this group discussed the meaning of the passage. For both the women, when identifying the plot, Jesus affirms the role of Mary, and Martha is counselled by Jesus not to be 'worried and upset' about the domestic chores. The identification of Martha with domestic chores is an easily identified contemporary 'role', directly related to the experience of the women. Mary is seen to have made a 'better choice', by implication engaging in 'theological reflection'. Martha, engaged in domestic chores, alternatively needs to 'get a life', and be liberated. When one reader enquires, 'shouldn't Jesus tell Mary to do domestic chores to help Martha', the response from the other reader is emphatic - Jesus says 'no'. The reaction of Jesus to Martha's complaint is not understood as rejection of Martha as a woman. Martha is identified as a 'worthy' woman, but one whose priorities about her 'role' were not right. The readers were clear that this was an

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526 Volume Two, pp. 48 - 49.

affirmation of what Mary was doing. Mary was not understood to be passive or submissive, but an active participant listening to Jesus. Affirmation of the equal importance for women, as well as men, to engage in theological study or reflection, is evident from the readers.

Women's Group Two[527]

My first intervention led Margaret Martinez, a local Aboriginal woman, to locate Jesus 'walking through Woolloomooloo'. Her interpretation of Jesus' behaviour concluded that Martha's concern for 'material' things was not as important as Mary's choice of listening to Jesus. This led to my second guided intervention 'Why do you think Martha is angry?'. I was interested to find out if the readers identified Martha's anger with Mary as the result of Mary moving outside expected roles. The response indicated alternatively that it was because Mary was not helping out with all the work that Martha chose to do, something Martha 'wasn't asked to do it she's taken it upon herself.' This in turn led to my third intervention, aimed at getting the readers to deal with the issue of roles further.

Margaret Martinez, the most dominant reader of this passage in the group, suggested Martha chose to make the meal 'so elaborate', hence her behaviour was a matter of choice. She identified Mary 'relaxing'. This was challenged by other members of the group, with the conclusion that women may have choices today concerning roles, but did not have 'then'.

Margaret Martinez tended to continually 'spiritualise' the passage, identifying Mary's motive for her behaviour as being a concern for 'what was on the inside', and that Jesus' response indicated the 'soul' was more important than 'lamb chops'. Both these interpretations were disputed by others in the group, who claimed there was nothing in the story to support these ideas. Margaret qualified

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527 Ibid., pp. 193 - 195.

her statement to conclude that Jesus would (and does) challenge people to do some reflection about the way they are.

My final intervention inquired of the group what the story had to say about roles for women. The group concluded that women were being invited, both in the story and as a result of the story, to identify the most important role as 'finding God' which included 'theological reflection' and/or women in ministry, while keeping other role related activities in balance. One reader suggested the story meant that women in the contemporary world 'don't just do bible study' and 'don't just do housework', but a balanced combination of the two. The final interpretation of the passage suggested that women have the freedom to choose to engage actively in theological thinking or ministry, and not just be confined to 'domestic chores'. This was confirmed by the final statement of a reader, 'It's amazing that in 1996 women are still concerned about getting what are their rights, and here Jesus has given us the right to get out of a role and do something different.'

Analysis

Both groups identified the story as empowering to women in terms of access to theological education and ministry. Jesus was identified as giving women the right to step outside roles determined by the culture and society of the day. For the Glebe readers the story meant 'the same today as it said then'. There was little difficulty in appropriating a first century story for their twentieth century experience.

Margaret Martinez, in the Women's group, was the most persistent in interpreting the story in terms of both her experience of a dominant church theology and what as a result she thought the bible ought to say. Raised in the context of a mission with a missionary theology that suppressed the physical and material and prioritised the spiritual, she reflected this approach to reading the text on a number of occasions. However this was modified by others in the group who were not so heavily informed by this tradition. Feminist theology informed a minority of readers

in the Women's group. The ideology of patriarchy and the associated concepts of natural law assigning women domestic roles was rejected by the readers.

Neither reading group was dependent upon historical material to arrive at an interpretation of the story. Location of the story outside of the reader's contemporary history clarified the difference between choice for women 'then' and 'now'. This was the only reference to any historical material behind the story.

It appears that the women in the groups read this story as one that is empowering and liberative in terms of roles and their right to engage in ministry and training. This reflects their marginalisation within the ecclesial world in Sydney, more so than a disadvantaged social location. However domestic activities clearly were the dominant role for each reader, indicative of their location, by and large, outside the professional middle-class. This shared life experience undoubtedly shaped their reading of the story.

The ordinary reader's interpretation contrasts sharply with feminist readings of the story. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, The Women's Bible Commentary, and Sharon Ringe, all agree the story 'is a sad one for women'[528], identifying Luke's intent 'to undermine the leadership of women'[529]. Schüssler Fiorenza, acknowledging her presupposition that Luke-Acts seeks to diminish the leadership of women in the late first century church, utilises a hermeneutic of suspicion and remembrance to conclude that this Lukan story denigrates both Martha and Mary, and attempts to restrict women to a passive role.[530] In an expanded and revised version of a 1986 article published in 1992, titled 'Arachne - Weaving the Word', Schüssler Fiorenza adds to her hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance, a

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528 Ringe, p. 161.

529 Newsom & Ringe, p. 289.

530 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'A Feminist Critical Interpretation for Liberation : Martha and Mary: Luke 10 38-42', Religion and Intellectual Life 3,1986, pp. 21-35. Note Schüssler Fiorenza does his in the context of her related conclusion that Acts 6:1-6 subordinates the role of 'serving at table' or 'ministry of service' to 'ministry of the word', which is in turn reflected in this story of Martha the *diakonos* and Mary her sister.

hermeneutic of evaluation and proclamation and a hermeneutic of imagination, to conclude that:

> . . . the historical reconstruction of Luke 10:38 - 40 pits the apostolic women of the Jesus movement against each other and appeals to a revelatory word of the resurrected Lord in order to restrict women's ministry and authority. The rhetorical interests of the Lukan text are to silence women leaders of the house churches who, like Martha might have protested, and to simultaneously extol Mary's 'silent' and subordinate behaviour.[531]

To arrive at this position Schüssler Fiorenza indicates that 'feminist critical interpretation begins with experience. Many women greatly identify with Martha's plight . . . they secretly identify with Martha who openly complains, and they resent Jesus who seems ungrateful and unfair in taking Mary's side.'[532] This experience of women identified by Schüssler Fiorenza does not appear to be the experience of the readers in either group of ordinary women readers. The Glebe group identifies Martha with domestic chores, a 'role' easily identified by the women in their current contemporary experience. Mary is seen to have made a 'better choice'. The readers do not express any resentment with Jesus, or criticise his behaviour in the story, which the group feels free to do at other times, for example in their discussion of Luke 8:19-21 and also 11:27-28.

The Women's group in Woolloomooloo drew the distinction between Martha's lack of choice in cultural terms, that is preparing food for a special guest, and the reader's contemporary experience where there was a choice: 'but if I did it today I would have to say it was my choice to do it and not get angry if I'm the one doing it'. Schüssler Fiorenza's 'experience' is not shared by the readers. Neither did this group express resentment at Jesus.

The 'experiences' of the ordinary women readers provide a tool of suspicion from which to analyse the 'experience' Schüssler Fiorenza refers to. To what extent is

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531 Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said : Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 68.

532 Ibid., p. 56.

this an experience of white educated female academics from affluent American classes? Schüssler Fiorenza does suggest later in the paper that 'when contextualised in the life of lower and working class women, Mary's audacity in taking time out from work to sit idle and to relax in good company can have a liberating effect.'[533] Yet this reading remains, for Schüssler Fiorenza, naive and simplistic.[534] Can it be concluded that the contemporary sophisticated academic context in which Schüssler Fiorenza 'experiences' life, robs the text of any liberative dimensions for those in her particular social location?

Schüssler Fiorenza's 'narrative analysis' of the story concludes that the relationship between Martha and Jesus at the beginning of the story is one of 'equals', while Mary's is one of subordination as she seats herself at the feet of Jesus. Utilising Acts 6:1-6 as the interpretive key to the passage, with *diakonia* and attention to the word of God in competition, Martha the activist is rebuffed in favour of the dependent Mary.[535] Ringe suggests that Martha was not only active, but that she 'excels in "doing"'.[536] Newsom, Ringe and Schüssler Fiorenza further argue that to identify Mary's role as being unusual, or liberative in terms of the availability of religious instruction to women in the first century is to be anti-Jewish.[537] Ordinary women readers did not identify Mary as subordinate, passive or dependent. Theological reflection or thinking was understood to be an active role of listening and learning. Passivity was identified with choosing to accept a determined role. It was understood Martha was passively doing what was expected of her, and it was Mary who actively stepped out of this role to learn from Jesus. However Martha's role was not denigrated either. The ordinary readers concluded a balance was required between both the role of caring and service (as

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533 Ibid., p. 70.

534 Ibid.

535 Ibid., pp. 61-62.

536 Ringe, p. 161.

537 Ibid., p. 59. Specifically Schüssler Fiorenza argues that Mary's role when characterised as 'liberated' in terms of women's roles in first century Judaism is an anti-Jewish explanation and one which perpetuates the 'oppression and marginally of Christian women'; also Newsom & Ringe, p. 288. However it could be argued that some liberative reality certainly must be anti-Jewish and anti-Christian unless all that is Jewish or Christian in terms of culture is itself liberative. However human experience and history would suggest otherwise.

domestic chores), and the role of theological study or reflection and 'ministry'. At no stage does any reader conclude that Mary is subordinated by Jesus or that Martha is denigrated by Jesus. The women's reading is similar to that of the campesinos in The Gospel in Solentiname, where the hospitality of Martha is seen to be a good concern and so to is the concern of Mary to learn.[538] It seems apparent that the interface between ordinary women readers and professional women readers in reading this story points to the key role of social location in the variant interpretations.

Fitzmyer also utilises Acts 6:1-6 as a literary device to provide the key to understanding this story, although arriving at a somewhat different conclusion.[539] Fitzmyer understands the different roles not in terms of the 'domestic' as opposed to one of theological reflection and ministry for women, but as the 'spiritual' opposed to 'physical': 'the proper "service" of Jesus is attention to his instruction, not an elaborate provision for his physical needs.'[540] While Martha's service is not repudiated, 'a *diakonia* that bypasses the word is one that will never have lasting character; whereas listening to Jesus' word is the lasting "good" that will not be taken away from the listener.'[541] This reading of the story is similar to that of Margaret in the Women's group, reflecting the dominant theology of her Catholic tradition, which she identifies in other readings, as always emphasising the spiritual at the expense of the physical. Challenges to this way of reading by others in the group lead to a modification of this position, and the conclusion that the passage was about Jesus liberating women from certain role expectations. Fitzmyer's reading did not find close fit with the ordinary readings. Similarity between the readings in Glebe and Woolloomooloo and in Solentiname are identifiable as the campesinos resist and then reject the 'distinction between

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538 Cardenal, Vol. 3, pp. 105-111.

539 Cp. Philip Esler's conclusions with regard to Acts 6:1-6; identifying a linguistic one, difference between the Aramaic speaking *Hebraioi* and the Greek speaking *Hellenistae*, with the point of conflict their respective attitudes to the Temple - see Community and Gospel, pp. 135-161.

540 Fitzmyer, Vol. 2, p. 892. Fitzmyer also uses this story to 'balance' the 'service' of the Good Samaritan in the preceding verses with the priority of listening to the word.

541 Ibid., p. 892.

material and spiritual work'. Rather in a context where the provision of food is important Martha's role is not denigrated, but her concern for it as a priority is questioned.[542] Here the obvious question that arises is the influence of dominant church theology on interpretation. It is also evident that neither ordinary group of readers referred to Acts 6:1-6 as an interpretative key. The story of Mary and Martha read as a story in its own right.

A closer fit exists between the conclusions of Malina and Rohrbaugh, and Tannehill, although reading the story from different perspectives. Tannehill links Mary's behaviour to a repeated Lukan discipleship theme, where Mary is encouraged by Jesus to move beyond 'normal social roles and restrictions' and assume the 'role of disciple'.[543] Malina and Rohrbaugh conclude that Mary, in the act of listening to Jesus as the teacher, specifically 'at his feet', was acting like a male, and therefore had crossed the boundary of socially determined roles for women and men.[544]

The ordinary readings identified the story of Mary and Martha as one that does provide in the contemporary world, a model and rationale for women to move from a socially prescribed 'domestic sphere' into one where active participation in theological reflection and Christian ministry is endorsed by the Lukan Jesus in this story. These readings challenge assertions that any 'liberating' effect of the text in today's world is naive and simplistic, which reduce the text to the traditional dualism of spiritual and material, with the supremacy of the former at the expense of the latter.

Alternatively the ordinary readings conclude it is a story that liberates, not just Mary, but the readers themselves from socially prescribed roles in their Australian

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542 Cardenal, Vol. 3, p. 109.
543 Tannehill, p. 137.
544 B. Malina & R. Rohrbaugh, p. 348.

context, that rob them of access to theological thinking and active participation in ministry. [545]

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545 So to Cardenal, Vol. 3, p.111, where the reading group concludes that the distinction to be made between Mary and Martha was that the former was a 'revolutionary' and the latter was not.

On Economics

Luke 12: 16-21

Surry Hills Group[546]

Initially a reader understood the parable to be about gathering possessions and neglecting a relationship with God. Another suggested the meaning was contained in a warning not to invest all one's time in economic security, which was transient. Focus shifted from the concept of neglecting God to the neglect of the poor: 'I think the person in the story was already rich but there is no sense of him saying in the story what am I going to do for anyone else? He seems to just think of himself and there is no acknowledgment of the needs of others or God - he could have filled his existing barns and then given the rest to the poor, but no, it seems he just wants it all for himself'.

The parable was identified as difficult 'for us today' in light of the contemporary Australian economic system. This system, identified as capitalism, was 'all about getting riches and being materially secure and balancing the budget and keeping the economy on track'. One reader concluded that the parable's meaning went against the 'whole thrust of politics that is around' in Australia. In a society where the building of bigger and bigger barns was a dominant discourse, the question 'what is enough?' was acknowledged by the group as a difficult one.

In response to this question, the group agreed that having crops was acceptable. It was what one chose to do with the excess that was important. Greed and selfishness were identified as behaviour(s) targeted by the parable, that is the 'justice aspect' of the parable - 'what do we do with the abundance that we have?'.

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546 Volume Two, pp. 147 - 148.

The retired businessman in the group suggested that this teaching might need to be 'balanced' with the teaching of Paul, which he identified as: 'if you don't work you don't eat'. This was not taken up by the group. This reader continued with his original thinking that the parable was about the foolishness of storing up material goods as one's security, when one's security was to be in God. Other readers however took the parable further in a material sense, and concluded it was about selfishness, and very much 'what you do here and now'. This was again related to current economic practice where economic rationalism put the needs of people second. Hence the concluding comment: 'It's certainly about greed and what we do with the things we have. Being rich towards God implies being rich towards your neighbour'.

Glebe Group Two[547]

The entire chapter had been read, and the immediate response was that the meaning of the text was 'fairly straight forward' until verse 49. The parable meant that acquisition of worldly goods would not do one any good 'at the end of the day'. Greed and 'all the things we go after' were identified as distractions from the 'real things in life'. Understanding the parable was linked to verses 22-34 with the conclusion 'it's reassuring to me that God will look after our needs so we don't have to go running after them'. This was appropriated in very material terms: 'even though the larder may be empty God will provide'. I inquired if the meaning of the parable was in verse 15, a somewhat guided intervention as I was interested to see what determined the meaning of the parable for the readers. The group concluded the parable was about greed, teaching not to be greedy, and the verses were to be taken literally: 'It means what it means as it is written'. I then asked a more guided question relating verse 15 to contemporary society, and whether its 'plain' meaning would be well accepted. I was interested to see what level of critical analysis the readers would bring to their interpretation of the text. Their response indicated that verse 15 was 'in direct contrast' to the 'advertising' and

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547 Ibid., pp. 57 - 58.

consumerism of the day. Alternatively the parable was teaching people to be happy with what one had.

Analysis

The Surry Hills group's contemporary experience of capitalism provided the framework within which the parable was read. The parable was understood by the majority of the group, a more educated and middle-class group of readers, as biblical teaching that questioned the dominant Australian (and Western) discourse of consumer capitalism.

The Glebe group's contemporary experience of poverty provided the framework within which the parable was read. The parable was initially understood as one of warning about accumulating material goods and greed, but was also interpreted in light of verses 22-34, as one of comfort for those who were poor. The readers in the Glebe group more readily identified the spiritual meaning of the passage, but related this to an assurance that God would look after their material needs. They, like Fitzmyer, identify a judgemental aspect to the parable.[548] The group required guided interventions to facilitate a reading within the framework of their wider experience of Australian society. The group took the meaning literally, and in their immediate social location were influenced by verses 22-34 more so than by the teaching of the parable - which to a certain extent was not directly relevant to their circumstances in that they were not in a position to accumulate wealth. Those from the poorest social location agreed: 'It's reassuring to me that God will look after our needs so we don't have to go running after them'.

The retired businessman in the Surry Hills group appeared to be the most uncomfortable with the conclusion that the parable called into question the basis of the economic system in which he lived, linking the teaching in the parable to his 'translation' of Paul's teaching: 'if you don't work you don't eat'. It appears that the

548 Fitzmyer, Vol. 2, p. 971.

social location of the retired businessman, and a conscious or unconscious connection between the parable and the Protestant work ethic informed his reading. Others in the Surry Hills group concluded the parable was about greed in today's world, avoided by giving away to those in need what we have in abundance. Ownership in itself was not considered wrong, but rather what one does with what one owns. The conclusion of this group that 'being rich towards God implies being rich towards your neighbour' is strikingly similar to Fitzmyer's conclusion, that the parable as part of the Lukan teaching on wealth 'implies the use of wealth on behalf of others as the way to become "rich with God"'.[549]

Significant similarities continue between the reading of the Surry Hills group and Fitzmyer's interpretation, the most significant difference being the application of the parable's meaning. For Fitzmyer it is one of individual application. For the Surry Hills group it is one of a more systemic application. Fitzmyer suggests that the amassing of wealth is indifferent to Luke. What is of importance is the 'iniquitous seduction that invariably comes with it, distracting that person from the consideration of what life is all about.' He adds: 'this may sound like bourgeois piety; but it is part of the message of the Lukan Jesus'.[550] His earlier consideration of the dispute between the two brothers, that provides the background to the parable, concluded that Jesus' refusal to arbitrate was an indication of Jesus' lack of concern for material things. 'It is much more important to *be* than to *have* - to be one who listens to God's word and acts on it than to live in an unnecessary abundance of wealth'.[551] Fitzmyer's 'bourgeoisie piety' does not appear to take account of what the parable might mean for an ancient or modern economic system. The focus is on the way in which individuals should deal with wealth. The amassing of wealth is not considered in terms of an analysis of the effect this 'amassing of wealth' might have. Coupled with his earlier statement that 'wealth should be used on behalf of others', Fitzmyer may be reflecting the dominant

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549 Ibid., p. 972.

550 Ibid.

551 Ibid., p. 969 (italics Fitzmyer's).

capitalist 'trickle down' ideology, arguing the amassing of wealth by some will eventually benefit the poor.

The Surry Hills group does identify however, that the process of amassing an abundance of goods, is, as an aspect of the teaching of the parable, *not* indifferent to the contemporary meaning of the parable: 'It's very applicable because everything today is centred around economics and not people. Take the example of overseas aid in the budget. Cut to shreds. We, like a wealthy country, say we have to balance the budget, build bigger and bigger barns or only give aid that benefits us'.[552]

The common conclusion by both ordinary reading groups that the parable called into question a major economic discourse in contemporary society, contrasts with the approach to this parable by Malina and Rohrbaugh. Considered within their reconstruction of first century agrarian society in both scenarios of honour-shame and limited good, they suggest that in this society, an honourable man would be interested only in what was rightfully his, or what he already had. He would not want more. 'Anyone with a surplus would normally feel shame unless he gave liberally to clients or the community. By keeping everything to himself and refusing to act as a generous patron, the rich man in the parable reveals himself as a dishonourable fool'.[553] There is no implied or explicit critique of first century agrarian society in this parable of Jesus. Rather once again, Jesus is the archetypical honourable gentlemen, reflecting cultural and social values.

Malina and Rohrbaugh's reconstruction of the historical location of the Lukan text contrasts with that of Ringe, who suggests alternatively that inheritance issues need to be understood in the context of a society 'built around patterns of security

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552 Volume Two, p. 147.

553 Malina & Rohrbaugh, p. 359. 'This concept of greed is tied to the ancient notion of limited good: availability of goods is finite and already fully distributed and cannot be expanded. Therefore if anyone's share got larger, someone else's automatically got smaller. Everyone who gained more as a result of his own dealing was therefore considered a crook.'

and social position related to one's economic status', in an 'economy where wealth and security are measured in the goods one has accumulated'.[554] This sounds remarkably like the twentieth century society Ringe inhabits. The key to the parable is warning against greed and the accumulation of wealth. Ringe applies this on an individual basis, but does not apply it to contemporary economic realities.

The concept of limited good, identified by Malina and Rohrbaugh as a key aspect of first century agrarian society, appears relevant to the campesinos in Solentiname, who agree 'the richer a man is the more he has exploited' and that this is exploitation is of worker's labour.[555] This is where their similarity with Malina and Rohrbaugh ends. Their reading locates the meaning of the parable totally within their contemporary experience, confirming Jesus came to destroy a social order that sanctions private property, inheritance laws and capitalist exploitation.[556] A Protestant visitor to the group suggested that Jesus came to share spiritual things rather than material things. The group rejects this, and any separation of the spiritual and material - 'if the only thing shared is spiritual, then the people starve to death.'[557] It was agreed that Jesus did not come to create capital, although the group identified that many 'rich' people made that assumption and thought religion should protect their wealth and right to it. It was suggested that 'in a Christian society, that's to say in a socialist or communist society, there shouldn't be any inheritances'.[558] A further comment concluded: 'Jesus wants nothing to do with the rich, not even to do justice among them, because he knows that among them everything is injustices, and he rejects their system totally'.[559] There are similarities between the Surry Hills, Glebe group and campesinos' rejection of capitalist society, a rejection not shared with any of the professional readers discussed above. Again it appears that the social location and context of

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554 Ringe, pp. 177-178.
555 Cardenal, Vol 3., p.118.
556 Ibid., p. 112.
557 Ibid., p. 115.
558 Ibid., p. 113.
559 Ibid., p. 114.

the groups *directly* inform their respective consideration of those who are rich. For the campesinos it is one of total rejection. For the Glebe group it is one of warning. For the Surry Hills group it is one that critiques the system that creates a division between rich and poor, without a direct rejection of the rich.

With the exception of the retired businessman in the Surry Hills group, ordinary readers did not consult or quote other passages of Scripture to arrive at meaning in the passage. This contrasts most significantly with Tannehill's approach. With frequent reference to other Lukan passages dealing with possessions (16:1-31 and 18:18-30), and the picture of the early church in Acts 2, (which had 'all things in common'), Tannehill concludes the meaning of Luke 12:16-21 is contingent upon the other passages, which together depict a 'regularised system of charity'. As expected, he suggests this teaching is directed at a first century audience of disciples and crowd. No contemporary audience is identified.

Fitzmyer's distinction between the Lukan Jesus of early Christianity and the authentic Jesus does not surface at all with the ordinary readers. Noting textual difficulties with verse 15, Fitzmyer suggests the verse is more likely to be an appended saying, 'which may reflect an early Christian attitude, rather than an authentic logion of Jesus'.[560] Historical material and such distinctions did not surface with the ordinary readers. Neither does it appear to be necessary for their understanding of the passage. The ordinary readings challenge both Fitzmyer's and Malina and Rohrbaugh's interpretations, precisely because they address contemporary meaning and seek to understand this contemporary experience critically through the text. The Surry Hills group provides another example of how critical analysis by ordinary readers, partially constituted, but not overwhelmed by dominant economic ideology and an associated theology, allows the text to speak over and against their contemporary experience, rather than dissolve the text into their contemporary experience. It also reflects to some extent the manner in which their analysis of local and broader Australian issues has been shaped and

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560 Fitzmyer, Vol. 2, p. 968.

informed by their dissatisfaction with conservative evangelicalism in Sydney, and appropriation of a more open and inquiring approach to social and biblical analysis.

On God

Luke 12: 41- 48

Surry Hills Group[561]

Only one maintenance intervention was required in the process of initiating discussion. The group focused on the master's response to the bad manager, and the extent to which the master could be said to be representative of God. The retired business manager in the group had less difficulty with the idea of the bad manager 'coping it sweet', than other readers in the group. He was more accepting of a punishing God, identifying on a number of occasions, divine retribution for people who 'beat and oppress' others, and that God does not 'accept disobedience'.

Others readers found the punishment severe, and could not accept that God would behave in the same manner as the master. The violent nature of the punishment, described as 'corporal punishment and even capital punishment', led one reader to comment that the parable had little relevance or application to contemporary experience, and reflected the historical context in which it was written. In response it was agreed that if the parable was read in such a way that identified the master with God, such an identification contradicted other images of God in the Gospel. It was suggested, in order to make a point, that the parable exaggerated the punishment handed out to the bad manager. Note was taken of different translations - some did not have 'cut him to pieces' (as in the NRSV), but the alternative 'cut him off'. The latter was interpreted in contemporary terms as possibly meaning 'giving him the sack'. The distinction between being 'knowingly' bad and 'ignorantly' bad was correlated with the severity of the punishment.

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561 Volume Two, pp. 149 - 150.

Continuing to discuss the severity of the punishment, it was suggested by one reader, that perhaps the severity was of particular importance to the parable's original intended audience - the disciples. If the parable was addressed to the disciples, in view of the previous week's reading, where they had been given the 'secrets of the Kingdom', the harshness of the punishment was related to the responsibility they now had. This warning, translated into contemporary meaning, was then a particularly harsh one to church leaders: 'who discriminate and oppress those for whom they are responsible'. Discussion of the nature of the punishment continued, with the retired businessman in the group, conceding that in contemporary terms 'cut him to pieces' would more likely be a 'real dressing down with words' or at least 'public exposure' of the person who had been so unjust. Other members of the group remained unable to accept that the master was representative of God. At best it was a 'repugnant' image of God, and the story's purpose to provide 'as strong as warning as Jesus could give to those who will carry on his work.'

Glebe Group Two[562]

The group did not require any interventions. The story was identified as addressing the issue of responsibility for possessions, a responsibility that the slave in the story abused. The contemporary meaning of the story was identified with little hesitation. People in both church and public life were identified as people acting in the same manner as the slave. The varying degrees of punishment were noted as warnings for those who engage in such abusive behaviour. It was noted that they were very violent forms of punishment. The suggestion was made, in light of earlier discussion concerning possessions, that perhaps the meaning of the story was instruction about giving away extra possessions. This was rejected in favour of an alternative meaning: 'it's about being responsible when you have a position of trust' and hence 'very relevant teaching for people today in power wherever they are but especially in the church.' The group agreed that the

562 Ibid., pp. 58 - 59.

punishment was severe and if the parable was retold in a contemporary setting, it would be unacceptable to suggest the same type of punishment.

Analysis

Both ordinary reading groups applied the meaning of the passage to their contemporary experience. They identified the subjects of the warning in the story, to be those in positions of power in both public and church life, but particularly in terms of the church. The Glebe group identified the punishment was for people in positions of power. The readers in the group did not identify themselves in such a position, or as the objects of the teaching.

Contemporary reality in the Surry Hills group directly influenced the ability of readers to accept a connection between the master's behaviour and God. The retired businessman in the group was most able to accept a more 'tough' image of God, and felt managers (or slaves) who did not do what was expected of them, deserved to be punished. This appears to some extent to be a reflection of the image of the 'tough' Australian male, a direct descendent of the Australian bush man. Rex, an unemployed University graduate, along with the other female members of the group, found the image offensive and contradictory to other images of God. A God using corporal or capital punishment was not acceptable, and diminished the relevance of the story for contemporary experience. In terms of the 'workplace', it was noted that such behaviour by a manager or master today would be totally unacceptable, as Unions were present to protect workers from what appeared to be such unjust punishment.

The Glebe group did not find the concept of God punishing those who abuse their positions of power and privilege as offensive. This reaction may reflect their understanding that the teaching of the parable was not relevant to them. As people marginalised by poverty in society, and from church hierarchical structures, the severity of the punishment was not a focus of discussion. Applied to others, it

was regarded as severe, but the degree of offensiveness that the punishment produced in the Surry Hills group was not present. This appears to be supported by the group's response to verses 49 - 50, discussed immediately after this story. The image of Jesus presented in these verses was described as contradictory to images of Jesus the group had identified in previous readings. It was noted the suggestion that Jesus came to bring fire to the earth, contradicted his behaviour in the story of his rejection by the Samaritan village, while the suggestion that he came to divide families and cause disruption was in contrast to what Jesus had previously been teaching.[563] It appears plausible that the readers identified themselves as possible victims of Jesus' behaviour in verses 49 - 53, but not as the possible victims of God's punishment in verses 41-48. This appears to have influenced their acceptance or otherwise of behaviour attributed to God or Jesus in these stories.

Both ordinary readers and professional readers, utilising a variety of approaches, arrive at the conclusion that the warning in the story is for church leaders.[564] Fitzmyer identifies the servant in verses 42 - 46 as possibly referring to community officials in Luke's community, and the servant in verses 47- 48 as originally referring to leaders of the Palestinian community, but in the Lukan context refers to those 'entrusted with service to the Christian community'.[565] So too Ringe, who suggests that the story is used to clarify the role expected of the disciples and their successors, who are leaders in the Lukan community.[566] In a more contemporary context the campesinos in Solentiname identify the warning of the story to be addressed to both church and political leaders, indeed leadership of any kind.[567]

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563 See Ibid., p. 59 - 60. The idea of Jesus bringing 'divine retribution' in a manner described in these verses was rejected.
564 This is with the exception of Malina & Rohrbaugh, who make no comment on the parable.
565 Fitzmyer, Vol. 2, pp. 989 & 992. Fitzmyer does not include the Twelve.
566 Ringe, p. 180.
567 Cardenal, Vol. 3, pp. 121 - 123.

Tannehill also suggests the parable applies to leaders who are given responsibility for others, but unlike other readers, identifies that responsibility to be the provision of food. He achieves this conclusion through what he calls 'suggestive associations' between the feeding of the five thousand and other parts of Luke's gospel, including Luke 12: 41- 42. The focus of the parable in light of this suggestive association, is the duty of the manager to provide the allowance of food at the proper time. His conclusion is that Peter, representing the apostles, is informed of his responsibility within the church, 'and that responsibility is presented parabolically in terms of feeding others'.[568] Tannehill is alone in this reading of the parable.

This dissimilarity in reading highlights the influence of process, method and intention, when reading takes place. The ordinary readers read the story with the intention of understanding it in its final form and relevance for contemporary experience. Associations with other passages of Luke are not immediately relevant or necessary in the same way in which Tannehill proceeds. Comparisons with other passages do enter into the interpretative process, however the ordinary readers read in a more clearly defined episodic way. This contrasts with Tannehill's concern to read Luke - Acts as a unified literary work, and his concern to identify internal connections among different parts of the narrative, based upon his identification of key Lukan themes or disclosures. In this parable, the process of reading through suggestive associations internal to the text, leads to a nuance and meaning not identified by other readers. It appears plausible to inquire procedurally whether the association shapes the final meaning of the story under consideration, possibly distorting an aspect of the story's 'plain' meaning identified by the ordinary readers.

From an historical-critical approach, both Fitzmyer and Ringe identify the passage under discussion as dealing with eschatological issues, essentially how the Lukan community is to wait for the expected return of Jesus in light of what appears to be

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568 Tannehill, Vol. 1, p. 217.

delay.[569] Fitzmyer suggests the verses present a 'series of eschatological counsels' and admonitions.[570] However this dimension does not surface in any of the ordinary readings, with the exception that Cardenal himself raises the issue with the campesinos.

Cardenal introduces the return of Christ into the discussion with the campesinos by way of comment on verse 41. This explanation becomes somewhat obscure when Cardenal responds to questions about the identity of the master. He suggests: 'the Christ that is leaving is an individual person, and the Christ that is returning is the people'.[571] The return of Christ is identified with the return of people to their rightful place in society. Taken up later in the discussion by the campesinos, the eschatological aspect of the story is identified as both future and present: 'every place we see social change, it's him coming and he's already coming to judge'.[572] In this sense the campesinos identify their responsibility and that of church leaders to be the establishment of a just society, which in turn is a manifestation of Christ's return. Context and contemporary experience clearly shape and inform their reading.

The nature of the punishment promised to those who do not act responsibly, and to what extent this punishment is reflective of the nature of God, is not considered by other professional readers with the exception of Fitzmyer. He identifies those scholars who suggest that the dismemberment of the manager must be understood literally, distancing himself from that conclusion, suggesting alternatively the severe punishment is better understood figuratively.[573] He also suggests that the dismemberment, the 'cutting in two', is a punishment that corresponds to the 'double life' that the manager would be leading, conceding however that it is difficult to say how much allegory is involved with this particular

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569 Fitzmyer, Vol. 2., p. 985; Ringe, p. 181.
570 Fitzmyer, Vol. 2., pp. 985 & 991.
571 Cardenal, p.121.
572 Ibid., p. 124.
573 Fitzmyer, p. 990.

aspect of the parable.[574] Fitzmyer makes a further comment on the manner in which punishment is handed out according to knowledge and culpability: ' A more severe beating is given to the wilful disobedience of the lazy loafer who knows what is expected of him than to the dim-wit who does not.'[575] Perhaps Fitzmyer's contemporary experience of church leadership shapes and informs his comment more so than may have often been assumed.

Perceptions of God shape and inform the reader's interpretation of the parable in the Surry Hills group. Where Jesus or God is identified with violent retribution, in both the Surry Hills and Glebe group, the readers identify contradiction with other images of God and Jesus' behaviour. Dominant church teaching on God as a God of punishment and anger appears to be questioned by the majority of the ordinary readers, who find such an image offensive in light of their contemporary experience. Only one male reader appears comfortable with the image.

The suggestion that the nature of the punishment would be required to change if the parable was told in a contemporary context, points to the 'otherness' of the text for the readers, and also to how this historical embededness of the text renders it as either offensive or irrelevant. The identification of contradictions in this portrayal of God, if that was what was intended by the parable, and the portrayal of God in the behaviour and other words of Jesus in other parts of the Gospels reveals a 'canon within the canon' for the ordinary readers, one shaped and informed by the more humane understanding of the sanctity of human life gaining more acceptance in contemporary society. In this sense the 'then' of the text is modified by the 'now' of the ordinary reader's experience and commitments, which makes the severity of the punishment in the parable unacceptable, and repugnant when attributed to the actions of a righteous God.

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574 Ibid., p. 986.
575 Ibid., p. 992.

On Dishonesty or Justice?

Luke 16: 1-13

Surry Hills Group[576]

At least three readers admitted not having read the parable before. Others suggested they had not read it for a very long time. The retired businessman in the group repeatedly stated his disbelief that this parable was in the Bible. In order to promote the forward movement of the group I intervened with the suggestion we proceed to read the story in the usual manner.

Difficulty with the content of the parable was identified in a number of places. The group could not understand the meaning of verse 9. The group could not identify who 'they' were that would provide the welcome into 'their' eternal homes. Similar problems occurred with verse 8 and the identification of children of this age and the children of light. It was agreed that as they were not readily identifiable the meaning was obscure, and that: 'we don't know who they represent then or now'. The group repeatedly found difficulty with the suggestion that the dishonest manager was being commended for his behaviour. When the suggestion was made that the dishonest manager was being commended for his shrewdness and not his dishonesty, contemporary examples were provided by the group to dissolve any suggested difference in the story between being dishonest and shrewd.

The group found the verses following the parable to be meaningful. Verse 10 made 'sense': 'that bit is about trust and being faithful with what you are given'. Verse 13 also had contemporary meaning and was something one would expect Jesus to say. One reader suggested the key to the meaning of the parable may be the presence of the Pharisees and their response to the parable in verse 14,

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576 Volume Two, pp. 159 - 161.

leading in turn to the response of Jesus in verse 15. Another suggested that perhaps the parable was instruction to the disciples who were incompetent with money. These suggestions were not fully taken up by the group, who repeatedly found the commending of the dishonest manager contradictory to their expectations. These expectations were formed in response to accepted 'ethical' teaching in both church and society, that dishonesty is not an acceptable form of behaviour, but particularly within the context of contemporary business practice.

In response to my repeated interventions about any possible contemporary meaning of the parable, the group agreed that such a meaning was not evident. It was repeatedly noted that the group could not understand the parable, as it appeared to the group they 'did not have the full story' or 'enough information to make full sense of it', and that even the verses appeared to be 'out of order'.

It was agreed that: 'Jesus cannot be saying dishonesty with other people's property or money is a good thing'. It was finally agreed to leave the parable and move onto 'something we can understand'.

Glebe Group Two[577]

Analysis of the plot led to confusion about why the dishonest manager was being commended. Verses 8 and 9 were identified as difficult to understand.

The group was clear on the meaning of verses 10 and 13. The group discussed the application to contemporary experience of the admonition of Jesus, that one could not serve God and mammon. This teaching contradicted the 'teaching' of the 'modern world': 'we are always being told to serve money!'. The group considered if it was possible to accumulate riches and still have time for God. They concluded that some wealthy people did appear concerned with the interests

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577 Ibid., pp. 69 - 71.

of others, although for the very wealthy, giving money away would not be as significant or costly a gift as giving away their time 'and their self'.

My intervention returned the focus of the group to the parable and the difficult aspects they had identified. The group concluded that what they understood the parable to be suggesting contradicted the most basic teaching they had received: 'thou shalt not lie'. A reader suggested however, that the dishonest manager may not have been a 'really bad' person, but one who in the face of the need for self-preservation used 'animal cunning' in order to survive. The group did not fully accept this explanation. Such behaviour was identified at the heart of capitalism and the banking system and condemned. This was due to the recognition by the group that even if the dishonest manager was using skills for the sake of self preservation, he was using money that he did not own.

The group concluded the parable had no identifiable contemporary meaning.

Analysis

Both ordinary reading groups read the parable and the appended sayings as one story. This was due to paragraph divisions in the NRSV, the primary translation being used in both groups. Both groups concluded that the parable did not have an easily identifiable contemporary meaning. What appeared to the readers to be the master's commendation of the manager for dishonesty and shrewdness, in light of their contemporary understanding of honesty, was unacceptable. Such a commendation, and the advice of Jesus in verse 9 to 'make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth', contradicted church teaching about honesty. Contemporary experience in the Surry Hills group discounted the possibility of there being a difference between dishonesty and shrewdness in secular business. In practice shrewdness was identified as merely another word for dishonesty.

The distinction between dishonesty and shrewdness is crucial for the majority of professional readers interpreting the passage. Fitzmyer, acknowledging the parable as difficult, suggests Jesus uses the parable to instruct his disciples on the proper attitude toward, and the use of, material possessions.[578] After a brief discussion of how the parable has been interpreted from patristic times, he notes modern commentators have not improved the situation. After addressing the issue of where the parable ends, Fitzmyer considers its meaning, isolating four questions - the first of which asks 'in what way was the manager dishonest?'.[579] Fitzmyer concludes the parable does not explain how the manager was dishonest, and that it does not matter. The manager is simply dishonest. Fitzmyer's second question leads to a reconstruction of the economic context in which the parable was told. In this economic system a manager entering into contracts on behalf of the rich master would have added a percentage additional cost to each contract as his own commission. Fitzmyer suggests this was common practice. Malina and Rohrbaugh assert that there is no basis for this assumption, an assertion to which we will return.[580] On the basis of this historical reconstruction and in answer to the third question, 'why does the master praise the manager?', Fitzmyer concludes, the master praises the manager for his prudence or shrewdness: 'because he realises that the manager has eliminated his own commission from the original usurious bonds'.[581] Consequently the dishonesty of the manager has no relation to the manager's behaviour in verses 5 - 7. Here the manager, who had been dishonest, was simply giving up his fee, both a way of gaining friendship with the debtors as well as receiving praise from the master. Fitzmyer now has an answer to his original question. He suggests the parable is not a warning against the destructive nature of riches, neither is it approval of the dishonesty of the manager. The *prudence* of the manager is the behaviour approved by the master, because of the manager's ability to use what material possessions were his, to ensure his future security. In this way the manager becomes a model for the

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578 Fitzmyer, Vol. 2, p. 1095.
579 Ibid., p. 1097.
580 Malina & Rohrbaugh, p. 374.
581 Fitzmyer, Vol. 2., p. 1098.

disciples, not because of his dishonesty, but because of his prudence.[582] Historical reconstruction is crucial for Fitzmyer's approach.

Malina and Rohrbaugh produce historical evidence to the contrary suggesting that all principle, interest and fees had to be in a publicly written contract approved by both parties. They also suggest that a manager's fee would have led to rage on the part of the peasants, making impossible any further relationship between manager and debtor. Consequently they suggest that the debtors were those renting land and paying through a fixed amount of produce. Although not directly stated the implication is that the manager is reducing a debt that is not his to reduce. On the basis of this historical reconstruction Malina and Rohrbaugh suggest that the meaning of the parable is about mercy. They identify the reaction of the rich land owner as merciful, in view of the fact that the manager could have been put in prison or made to repay what had been mismanaged. Alternatively, and mercifully, he is only dismissed. They suggest that the manager relies on a similar reaction to the scheme he enacts in verses 5 - 7. Once the debts are reduced, if the rich land owner reversed this reduction, he would risk alienation from his debtors entirely. If he allows the reductions to stand 'he will be praised far and wide (as will the manager for having arranged them) as a noble and generous man'.[583] No discussion takes place with regard to the master's commendation of the manager's shrewdness or dishonestly which appears to be taken for granted. Once more historical reconstruction is the key to arrive at an understanding of mercy as the meaning of the parable.

In a similar way Ringe considers peasant economies, or 'economies of scarcity' as crucial to understanding the parable. She also argues that attention to some of the specific language in the parable will also begin to unlock its meaning, primarily about wealth. The traditional description of the parable as the dishonest or unjust manager is totally unjustified, because 'the parable contains no language related

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582 Ibid., pp. 1098 & 1101.

583 Malina & Rohrbaugh, pp. 374 - 375.

to "honesty"'.[584] While unjust may be closer to the text, it is still misleading. Ringe states that in the Greek text, the manager is called 'the manager of injustice'.[585] It appears in this suggestion she is alone. Fitzmyer prefers the 'manager of dishonesty'.[586] Ringe proposes that the manager of injustice, by reducing the amount owed by the debtors, is acting justly. He is no longer managing a system that perpetuates and adds to the inequity between rich and poor, but instead reflects the new economy announced by Jesus.[587] Here the distinction between the initial dishonesty of the manager and his later shrewdness is dissolved by the assertion that there is no evidence that the failure of the manager, as a manager, was due to dishonest or illegal behaviour. By retranslating 'dishonest' to 'manager of injustice' within an economic framework where the victims of injustice are the poor, Ringe notes the concluding comments in verses 8b and 9 instruct the disciples to manage wealth shrewdly in the direction of justice. The manager displays a self interested shrewdness, as a child of this age, in contrast to the children of light who are more focussed on heavenly matters.[588]

Scholarly historical reconstruction and retranslation are utilised to make sense of the parable for Ringe. It is clear, however, without access to these sophisticated devices, ordinary readers engaged in this research, read the text as they received it, and did not find contemporary meaning in the parable. This was particularly influenced by their understanding of the place of honesty in Christian behaviour and ethical standards.

It would appear, that there is some fit between the ordinary readers in Solentiname and the conclusions of Ringe. This fit appears due to their contemporary experience of an economy of scarcity and injustice, rather than their utilisation of historical and literary devices. Their initial reaction, that the parable states it is not a sin to rob a rich man, is replaced by discussion relating to the

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584 Ringe, p. 212.
585 Ibid.
586 Fitzmyer, p. 1101.
587 Ringe, p. 214.
588 Ibid.

theme of wealth. The manager's astuteness or shrewdness is due to the fact that he gave away the wealth of a rich person to those who were in debt. All wealthy people are identified as thieves in view of the fact that the wealth of the land belongs to everybody - the people. The campesinos' discussion of this passage took place in the presence of visitors to their group identified as 'capitalists' and 'land owners'. One of these visitors argued the distribution of what belonged to others was dishonest. Cardenal's response states this action would not be dishonest, because what the rich have taken for themselves, belongs to all the people. It is suggested the parable is for the rich, and how the rich, following the example of the manger, can change: 'It's an invitation to the rich to be revolutionaries.'[589] The campesinos' discussion is dominated by contemporary issues concerning wealth creation, inequality and redistribution. It is Cardenal's conclusion that just as the rich (children of this age he identifies as the children of darkness) are diligent and efficient in exploitation so the children of light must be diligent in terms of justice, love and the redistribution of wealth.[590] Contemporary experience overwhelmingly informs and shapes the campesinos' and Cardinal's reading of the parable.

The reading in Solentiname has striking similarities with the reading of the parable from the cultural context of peasant farmers in West Africa.[591] Ukpong suggests an inculturation hermeneutic consciously and explicitly interprets biblical texts: 'from socio-cultural perspectives of different people, including both secular and religious culture and social and historical experiences'.[592] Unlike most readers of this parable, Ukpong shows how West African peasant farmers admire the manager who uses his power to grant debt reduction to his customers, and move away from the traditional identification of the rich man as representative of God and the manager as unjust. Enmeshed in an economic context where rich middle-men produce traders exploit them and create their weak economic position, for the

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589 Cardenal, Vol. 3, p. 210.
590 Ibid., p. 216.
591 Justin S. Ukpong, 'The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16: 1 - 13): An Essay in Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutic' Semeia 73, pp. 189 - 210.
592 Ibid., p. 190.

West African peasant farmers, the hero of the story is identified as the one who gives the debt reduction, acting on behalf of the exploited. The parable is interpreted not from the perspective of the rich man or the manager but in terms of the peasant farmers in the story - those who had their debt reduced. It appears Ukpong, a theologian with the Catholic Institute of West Africa, conducts the reading from the perspective of peasant farmers in West Africa, rather than as an actual reading by real-readers who are peasant farmers. In spite of this however, Ukpong's approach highlights the crucial question of what shapes and informs our reading of texts, and the perspective from which we approach the text. The determining theme for Ukpong is the Lukan concern for justice for the poor and Lukan teaching on wealth.[593]

So too Tannehill identifies Luke 16: 1-31 as one of three major sections of teaching by Jesus about possessions and wealth.[594] Essentially the point of the parable is in verse 9 where Jesus instructs the disciples to make friends by means of unrighteous mammon. Tannehill interprets this to mean: 'possessions are to be given in charity to others'.[595] Tannehill does note that the instruction to make friends with wealth may sound like crass manipulation of others for one's own benefit. Consequently he suggests this should be understood in light of the Greek ideal of true friendship through sharing.[596] Tannehill does not consider the question of dishonesty and does not appear to see it of consequence for understanding the parable.

A fit between ordinary readers and professional readers is apparent with regard to verse 13. The meaning for contemporary experience appeared evident. However, the inability of the ordinary readers to find an acceptable meaning for the parable 'then or now', raises a number of issues.

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593 Ibid., pp. 196 - 201.
594 Tannehill, p. 247.
595 Ibid., p. 247.
596 Ibid., p. 131.

Firstly, when the parable is considered with an alternative focus other than the behaviour of the manager and the rich man, a significant amount of meaning for contemporary situations (and historical situations) of poverty emerge. One reader in the Surry Hills group partially came to some meaningful appropriation of the parable when she considered it in light of verse 13, the behaviour of the Pharisees, and the response of Jesus in verses 14 and 15. It was unclear, but the suggestion was that the parable was 'somehow . . . condemning love of money', although the reader returned immediately to the question of honesty. The theme of honesty cast within the framework of contemporary business practice in an affluent first-world city dominated the focus of the group in reading the parable. In the Glebe group, where the readers had a keener sense of poverty, one reader did identify the behaviour of the manager as applaudable in terms of 'street cunning'. This tangentially related to justice, but appeared unacceptable to the group. Ringe's reconstruction, and the experience of contemporary poverty and oppression by the campesinos and the West African peasants provide an alternative focus for understanding the meaning of the parable, and shed new insights into what has been described as a *'crux interpretum* for exegetes'.[597]

In this sense the ordinary readers engaged in this research, could have their understanding challenged and enriched, when these alternative readings are considered by them. Most significantly, those readings that foreground the social location of the readers, and how readings emerge from that location, appear the most challenging. This is sharpened when we consider the way in which historical reconstruction, albeit a useful tool in arriving at a meaning for the parable, is so diverse, even amongst the small number of scholars discussed in this analysis.

A number of other issues also surface in the reading of this parable. If as Ringe appears to conclude, alternative translations that facilitate a more accessible and transparent meaning of the text both 'then and now' are available, why have they not been used? The issue of how alternative translations appear to lead to

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597 So Ukpong, p. 189.

alternative meanings or suggest a meaning was an issue that surfaced in a number of the ordinary reading groups, including the question of power in deciding which translation was the most appropriate one. A sense of suspicion was aroused in light of such differences.

Another issue that requires consideration is the way in which the ordinary readers managed passages in the Lukan text they concluded were not easily understandable. This in turn invites the question to what extent do professional readers of this parable (or other difficult Lukan texts) feel the need to find a meaning for the parable? When contemporary readers cannot understand a passage, or discover in it any contemporary meaning, is it an appropriate reading to conclude just that? This question surfaced on a number of occasions.

For example in the Glebe group Jesus' instruction to leave the dead to bury the dead (Luke 9: 60) was identified as offensive and contrary to the readers' desire to care for their parents and honour them in death, as well as their understanding of contemporary responsibility to parents.[598] The readers were concerned enough by this passage to consult a variety of sources (including a prominent Sydney Radio talk-back host) about the meaning of the text. After considerable discussion and 'research' the group could only accept that the text could mean 'leave dead issues behind you'. It could not be taken in a literal sense. They accepted they could not gain any further insight into the text. And they were willing to accept the text's inability to make sense within their contemporary life experience.

In the same way the Surry Hills group could not accept there was any contemporary literal meaning with the teaching of Jesus in Luke 14: 26.[599] This issue was raised at the final meeting of the group. I had asked the group how they felt about Luke's Gospel, in light of the fact that they had discovered what

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598 Volume Two, p. 42.
599 Ibid., pp. 153 - 154.

appeared to be contradictions in the text, and parts of the text they could not accept or fully understand. The conclusions are significant.

The group agreed they were comfortable with this 'puzzlement', and the following comments were made: 'But I know there are people around today that really do need to know everything, and work everything out, and don't feel comfortable if they can't. They need to control the text and its meaning. They can't sit with puzzlement where it exists, or let the text control them. But that's not me.' To this comment was added: 'If we are also happy to sit with puzzlement . . . then that's very important too, as it is the people in power who will not sit with puzzlement, it's the people in control and in power who have to puzzle it out, and then claim with their own constructions of the text, they know what others don't know'.[600]

Some conclusions appear possible:

The ordinary readers in the Glebe and Surry Hills groups appear to accept puzzlement and reject Gospel stories that contradict what they identify as the central teaching of the church in their context, or how they understand the central teaching of the Gospel.

This 'central' teaching however is identified from a perspective directly shaped by the readers' contemporary experience. Honesty is the focus for the readers in the context of Sydney, justice is the focus for the readers in Solentiname and West Africa.

This recognition gives rise to a sense of suspicion regarding the work of professional readers who arrive at a variety of conclusions about the meaning of the parable based upon their historical reconstructions. It begs the question again to what extent the contemporary experience of professional readers shapes and informs their final conclusions and reconstructions, and which of these comes first.

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600 Ibid., pp. 169 - 170.

The diversity of readings of this parable suggest that readers should approach the parable with a sense of humility and an openness that is willing to accept a lack of understanding (both for professional and ordinary readers), and a willingness to listen to how the parable is interpreted in other contexts. Here the lived experience of those in other contexts may read the text with a clear voice, providing a possible interpretation that speaks to our lack of knowledge and experience. For example from the perspective of the West African peasants, it is now possible for professional biblical critics to seek historical information that engages this interpretation. A new process for understanding a difficult parable may be developed. The process of dialogue and conversation becomes crucial.

On Women and Faith

Luke 23: 48 - 24:12

Women's Group Two [601]

The focus was the role of the women in the resurrection story, and what their role in the story might mean for women's contemporary experience. The group noted the continual presence of Mary Magdalene and Joanna with Jesus, since they were identified in chapter 8: 1-3. The presence of women at the crucifixion, when the body was laid in the tomb, and at the resurrection, was contrasted to the absence of the male disciples. Jesus' recognition of the women as the 'daughters of Jerusalem', was interpreted to be a 'special concern for the women'. It was noted that there was no similar recognition of the male disciples. The male disciples have a limited role in the resurrection stories, as well as a disbelieving role when the women tell them of the resurrection.

A visitor to the group from Korea drew a clear parallel between the disbelief of the disciples in the story with her contemporary experience: 'Women in Korea are too often dismissed as idle chatter - even when they bring the news of the resurrection - the greatest event of the idea of Christianity. Women were there all along and it has been hidden too long'. The group agreed that women were treated in a similar way by 'men in power in the church' in the Australian context. This recognition led the group to consider the passage in 1 Timothy 2: 8-15. The group noted how verses 11 and 12 were used by males in the church to silence women, and how the same males ignored the verses 8-10 and 13-15. This 'interpretive problem' was discussed recognising that only the texts that served the interest of males were used, and the others ignored. The Korean visitor to the group suggested that women reading together could 'pick up' the 'suppressed' parts of the text, and give them new meaning.

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601 Ibid., pp. 203 - 204.

Peter's reaction to the women's news was understood as encouraging as he did respond to what the women told him. The Chinese migrant concluded that the story gave women a significant role in the ministry of Jesus, because in spite of what she understood to be their historical role of 'looking after families' they stayed with Jesus all the way through the 'tragedy', while 'others returned home beating their breasts'. The women were also identified as 'brave'.

Women's Group Three [602]

A maintenance intervention reminded the group that the focus was the role of men in the resurrection story, and what their role in the story might mean for contemporary experience. The readers identified the males in the story as 'typical bloody ratbags - they don't believe the women'. Those readers who participated in the previous women's reading group in Woolloomooloo, recalled that Peter, who had the worst 'track record' of any of the disciples, did at least look in the tomb and respond to what the women said. The male characters were identified as 'unbelievers' when the women 'preach' the first resurrection sermon. This unbelief, clearly identified by the readers in verse 11, had been suppressed by the traditional teaching of the church. The group agreed that this traditional interpretation was sufficient grounds for anger by women today. The women in the story were identified as the ones who were given the 'full story' of the resurrection, are 'trusted with the truth' - a 'strong and very important role to be given in the story'.

Reference was made to the women's continual presence with Jesus since Galilee, and to their continual role in the company of Jesus. The meaning of the story appeared to be more 'powerful' when the role of the women was contrasted to that of the males. 'Maybe it's calling men to believe that women have an equal place in the whole process of being Christian and the church that they have for so long denied. They need to look in the tomb and realise it is empty and be liberated from

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602 Ibid., pp. 223 - 224.

their fears and prejudices.' The group responded with loud acclamation to this suggestion.

Analysis

The negative reaction of the male disciples to the Easter proclamation of the women disciples was identified as still the same reaction of males in the church to females in the church, in the reader's contemporary experience. This reflected the ecclesiological marginalisation of the women readers. The recognition by the readers of the central role of women in the resurrection story was empowering in terms of the self recognition of women in contemporary ministry. This was also the cause of anger. The manner in which the role of women in this story has been hidden or repressed by the church was, acknowledged on a number of occasions. Recognition that women had been travelling with Jesus since chapter 8 confirmed the importance of women in the ministry of Jesus, both in the story itself and the contemporary world of the readers.

The readers noted that focus on the respective roles of the males and females in the story revealed contrasts and meanings previously hidden. This was particularly the case with the portrayal of women as believers and the men as unbelievers. The reaction of the women to the news of the resurrection, that is that they believed what the angels said, was in stark contrast to the reaction of the males who did not believe the women's witness. As part of this reading process the Korean visitor identified how women reading together could uncover hidden meanings or suppressed meaning in the text.

The ordinary real-readers reading in Woolloomooloo and their interpretation of the resurrection story, contrasts sharply with the interpretation of Newsom and Ringe in The Women's Bible Commentary. They conclude: '. . . Luke's point is not to contrast believing, faithful women with disbelieving unfaithful men. Nothing is said about the women believing, although they do remember, and the men have not

been unfaithful. The point seems instead to be that the faith of the men who are Jesus' successors is not based on the word of the women, on indirect testimony'.[603]

Central to this interpretation is the identification by Newsom & Ringe of Lukan authorial intention. This intention is to establish that women are not the first believers in the resurrection, nor in light of Acts 1: 21-26 could they be witnesses to the resurrection. Luke's desire to present the male disciples in a more favourable light than the women disciples[604] requires Lukan suppression of female roles, and leads to their virtual disappearance in the last three chapters of Luke. Newsom & Ringe argue this is achieved by the author in a number of ways, firstly when the women disappear into the crowd. Editing a tradition which originally contained reference to women only, they suggest Luke adds at 23: 27 'of the people and'; and at 23:49 'all his [male] acquaintances'.[605] Secondly they suggest women's roles are reduced in significance, as the male characters gain power and prestige, and finally that the women are erased as 'essential designated witnesses'. The Markan and Matthean resurrection accounts, they regard as marginally more favourable to women, are an important redactional tool used to arrive at these conclusions. Faith in the risen Lord is dependent upon witnessing an appearance of the resurrected Lord. Unlike other Gospel accounts, women are not present in Lukan accounts of resurrection appearances.

This suggestion compares favourably with Fitzmyer and Tannehill who also suggest it is only the appearances of the resurrected Jesus that produces faith in the risen Lord. Neither Peter or the women actually have 'faith' at this point in the story. For Fitzmyer: 'their testimony does not engender faith; it does not give "assurance" (*asphaleia*)'.[606] He comments further on the observance they maintain of the Sabbath regulations in verse 56b, and concludes 'thus the

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603 Newsom & Ringe, p. 291.
604 Ibid., p. 289.
605 Ibid., pp. 289 - 290.
606 Fitzmyer, Vol. 2, p. 1543.

proclamation is made first to pious, observant Jewish women,' who happen to be followers of Jesus.'[607]

Tannehill discuses this resurrection narrative in two separate places in his writing, firstly in a section specifically on women and then briefly again in the section of his work dealing with the resurrection. In his chapter on 'Jesus' Ministry to the Oppressed and Excluded', amongst whose company women are to be found, he acknowledges that women were the first human witnesses to the resurrection but: 'it is not clear whether the women immediately believe what the angels tell them'.[608] Considering the story in the context of chapter 24, Tannehill suggests the angel's words do not bring 'insight and faith', although it is vague whether Tannehill is referring to the women or just to the eleven to whom the women make the announcement. Peter's reaction in verse 12 is identified as one of astonishment or wondering. This should not be confused with faith.[609]

Tannehill does recognise the significance of the continual presence of women with Jesus, noting that the angels request that the women 'remember' what Jesus had told them about his death and resurrection, a request which presupposes that the women were instructed about these important issues in the same way in which the male disciples were.[610] Their inability to remember however leads to 'sharp words of correction' from the angels - 'why do you seek the living among the dead' - that 'highlight [the women's] human ignorance'.[611]

Sharon Ringe also identifies the presence of the women with Jesus from Galilee to crucifixion, burial and the visit to the tomb suggesting their presence qualifies them as 'reliable and qualified witnesses to the resurrection'.[612] The act of remembering, discussed by Tannehill above, is crucial to Ringe's reading of the

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607 Ibid., p. 1544.
608 Tannehill, Vol. 1, p.139.
609 Ibid., pp. 278 - 279.
610 Ibid., p. 139.
611 Ibid., p. 278.
612 Ringe, p. 283.

resurrection story. She in turn argues it is crucial for Luke's interpretation of the resurrection, modifying her earlier comments in The Women's Bible Commentary: 'since the women indeed "remember" (24:8), Luke obviously intends to present them as part of the inner circle of disciples with whom such information was shared'.[613] The ability of the women to remember is contrasted with the inability of the disciples to remember, who dismiss the women's words, revealing 'they are not yet able to cross the bridge of memory that can take them from their days with Jesus, through the events of the passion, into the future of the church's mission.[614]

Malina and Rohrbaugh make no comment on the role of women in the Lukan resurrection account. Their focus is on the role the resurrection plays in vindicating Luke's claim that Jesus has the 'ascribed honor status of Son of God rather than village artisan.'[615] Taking spices to the tomb they identify as the expected role of family members, referring to the scenario of 'surrogate family' to explain why women who were not biological family would be attending to Jesus' tomb. It should be noted that their identification as the surrogate family or 'fictive kin group' as the locus for the Lukan Gospel, was one which 'transcends the normal categories of birth, class, race, gender, education, wealth, and power - hence is inclusive in a startling new way'.[616] They make no comment about issues of faith by either the women or the disciples.

It is clear that acute differences appear between the women reading in Woolloomooloo, and the scholars discussed above. Whatever the Lukan authorial intention was, and whether the focus was upon the role of women or men in the resurrection story, implicit in the readings of the women in Woolloomooloo is an understanding that the women in the story were the first to receive the news of the resurrection, they believed what they were told, and then returned to preach the

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613 Ibid., pp. 284 - 285.
614 Ibid.
615 Malina & Rohrbaugh, p. 410.
616 Ibid., pp. 335 - 336.

first Easter sermon. It is implicit in the understanding of the women that the women were the first to believe in the resurrection. They read the story in a way that made it obvious that the women were women who believed in the resurrection (so verses 8 and 9). Distinctions made between this announcement and resurrection appearances did not surface. The faith of the women witnesses was not questioned. Alternatively women in the story were identified, in similar fashion to Sharon Ringe's comments, as faithful and reliable witnesses because of their continual presence travelling with Jesus, and at the cross and burial.

A number of interpretive issues appear to require consideration. If the women in the resurrection story did not have faith in the resurrected Lord, a faith reserved for males at a later stage in the Gospel story, how is it that the women reading the story can be deceived by the text? What is it that makes their reading so different? Is it merely the question that they read pre-critically and without the tools of the academies? Should they be more suspicious of the author's intention and strategies? Or are the authorial intentions, identified by scholars like Fitzmyer and Newsom and Ringe in The Women's Bible Commentary, confused with their own interpretative agendas designed to promote Luke, in the former case confirming the future place of the male disciples in the early church, or in the latter as misogynist and patriarchal? Whose interests do these readings serve?

The women reading in Woolloomooloo were reading from a position of marginalisation within an ecclesial context that would have difficulty accepting that women were the first believers in the resurrected Lord. Despite, or in spite of this dominant ideology of patriarchy, it appears that the contemporary experience of women exercising their gifts in ministry and mission, shapes and informs their reading of the text. Their appropriation of the story in terms of contemporary meaning is one of empowerment and provides a clear alternative reading to that of scholars like Fitzmyer who appear committed to maintaining the role of male apostolic ministry at the expense of women.

It also appears that the women in Woolloomooloo have littlé difficulty with the historical concept of resurrection, with no attention being given to its nature or whether it actually happened. This acceptance allows for the empowering aspects of the story to be appropriated as the faith of the initial women witnesses is resurrected in the faith of the contemporary women readers.

Within the contemporary context of marginalisation, the women reading in Woolloomooloo clearly were able to identify 'suppressed' aspects of the story and appropriate this 'new' meaning as centralising them amongst those who bear ongoing witness to resurrected crucified Christ.

Conclusion

The process of analysis in this chapter has attempted to engage the readings of ordinary real-readers with the readings of professional readers in the Gospel of Luke. Dialogue and conversation has taken place, given the limitations of the process acknowledged at the commencement of this chapter. These limitations have not however overwhelmed the process.

The analysis has revealed the extent to which ordinary real-readers were (and are) explicitly and implicitly shaped and informed by their contemporary human experience in both their particular and wider Australian social and ecclesial context. It is apparent their readings are not value-neutral. Neither did they profess to be.

The analysis also revealed the extent to which synchronic reading strategies, commencing with contemporary human experience, can serve as a tool of comparison and suspicion when engaged in conversation and dialogue with professional readers of the biblical text - especially those claiming to offer a value-neutral reading.

We turn now to consider what implications such a process has for contemporary hermeneutics. Prior to that discussion, however we need to address issues related to the value and legitimacy of ordinary real-readers from disadvantaged and marginalised locations, and the value and legitimacy of their readings.

Following this discussion we will look at what implications there might be for contemporary hermeneutics, when ordinary real-readers' readings are permitted into the hermeneutic conversation. We will conclude with some consideration of what safeguards there might be against reading anarchy, when readers are identified as having a legitimate and valuable contribution to make to the meaning and interpretation of biblical texts for today.

Chapter Five

Ordinary real-readers and Contemporary Hermeneutics

Ordinary Real-readers - Identity, Place, Value and Legitimacy.

Identifying real-readers.

The world is full of real-readers reading.

Reader-response criticism, discussed in chapter two, has identified the reader as an *active* agent in giving meaning to a text.

Reader-response criticism, however, has largely focussed on an historical reader's *probable* response to the text, or 'fictive' and artificial readers with a variety of identities.[617] Tannehill is representative of scholars whose interest in the reader is through the author and how the author manipulates the reader to arrive at an understanding of the text.[618] A brief survey of reader-response approaches confirms Moore's observation a decade ago that the contemporary 'real', 'flesh-and-blood' reader has remained on the margins of, and rarely been admitted to a place by, the guild of biblical scholars.[619]

Renita Weems, a biblical scholar herself, suggests that biblical scholars have preferred the anonymity, objectivity and respectability of dealing with hypothetical readers, intratextual readers, even super readers, to the 'vulnerability,

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617 Moore, Literary Criticism, pp. 71-78. Moore identifies these hypothetical readers providing an experience of the text as an 'ineluctably cerebral one', reflecting the *sine qua non* of 'modern' scholarship : dispassionate objectivity and psychological distance; pp. 96-97.

618 Ibid., p. 77.

619 Ibid., pp. 99-102; p.105. See discussion in chapter 2 above.

accountability, and vulgarity of talking about the self and 'one's own social situatedness', as a real-reader reading.[620]

Identifying ordinary *real*-readers should not be difficult for those interested in biblical studies. They are the *majority* of readers reading the Bible today, and have been the majority since the printing press made the biblical text widely available. It is intriguing that this majority of real-readers (identified as non-elite, pre-critical and ordinary) have been 'silenced' and marginalised, intentionally or unintentionally, by the minority of real-readers (identified as professional, elite or critical) who determine the 'rules' of interpretation. One such rule is to distinguish between 'reading' and 'interpretation', the former being what ordinary readers do precritically, the latter what professional readers achieve critically.[621] Professional real-readers have silenced or marginalised their own 'realness' in favour of abstract objectivities and scientific approaches to biblical interpretation. As Weems points out, this minority of professional real-readers are themselves *real* flesh and blood readers with complex interests and social locations. Western scholasticism has, however, trained the professional scholar to avoid self-disclosure at all costs and ignore or deny the implications of real flesh and blood affiliations, of whatever type, and the influence these affiliations have upon scholarship.

This research has identified and engaged in a process of reading the Gospel of Luke with real flesh-and-blood readers, choosing to take their readings seriously, and as a contribution to the contemporary task of interpretation. An assessment of what reader-response approaches might have for this task begins with real-readers reading.

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620 Weems, 'Response to "'Reading With"', p. 258.

621 See Thiselton's discussion of Robert Fowler, 'Who is "the Reader" in the Text?', Semeia 31, 1985, pp 5 - 23, in New Horizons, pp. 315 - 316.

A *space* and a *place* for ordinary real-readers.

As briefly noted in chapter one, Pablo Richard, in an essay on biblical interpretation and indigenous cultures in Latin America, identifies what he calls two traditional hermeneutical 'spaces', the academic and ecclesial, as 'the institutional place(s) where a specific subject realises a specific reading or interpretation of the Bible'.[622] The academic space is constituted by the faculties of theology, the seminaries, or the specialised theological institutes where the subject is the exegete or biblical specialist - the professional reader. The ecclesial space is constituted by the liturgical space and the instructional space, including Tradition and Magisterium, where the subject is the ordained minister or duly constituted hierarchical person. In the academic space the subject carries out various 'critical' readings of the Bible, while in the ecclesial space the subject carries out a kerygmatic, magisterial, and normative reading of the Bible. Richard suggests that both the academic and ecclesial institutional places are 'necessary, legitimate and effective hermeneutic spaces'.

Richard then identifies a third 'space', a *place* created when a small community of indigenous readers read the Bible. These reading communities, Richard suggests, must be resourced with 'minimal biblical introduction', not in order to relegate the present experience of the indigenous readers, but in order to foreground this present experience as a useful tool in the process of reading the biblical texts. It is precisely this experience that enables a 'liberating' hermeneutic for a biblical interpretation from indigenous communities and cultures, one with the potential to break free from colonial Occidental Christendom.[623]

Richard's identification of this '*new hermeneutical space*'[624] has heuristic value as a model, not only for the identification of indigenous readers in his South American

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622 Richard, p. 312.

623 Ibid., pp. 308 - 309.

624 Ibid., p.313 (italics Richard's). The use of this 'model' provided by Richard is used in the sense that sociological models are used as conceptual vehicles for articulating and analysing a phenomenon the subject of which is being researched. As such it can serve as

location, but also for the identification of a place for ordinary real-readers throughout the world. The identification of these three 'spaces' should not be understood as mutually-exclusive places for hermeneutical reflection, but as abstract conceptualisations useful for identifying the distinctions between three possible locations where reading the biblical text takes place in different yet overlapping ways. Central to the argument of this thesis is the need for dialogue and conversation between all three 'spaces'. Yet the distinctions appear helpful for the purposes of this discussion and Richard is correct in suggesting this particular space must be recognised and appropriately resourced.

The readings of ordinary real-readers transcribed as part of the reader research for this thesis in Volume Two are a recognition of such a third hermeneutic space, in which ordinary real-readers have an authentic place.

But what value do they have, and what can they offer to the process of contemporary hermeneutics?

The *value* of ordinary real-readers

It is widely accepted that readers as active agents in the interpretive process all bring to that process different interpretive questions, tasks and agendas.[625] It is also widely accepted that there is no reading of a biblical text that is not also an interpretation, one shaped and informed by the *context* in which one is located. There is no value-neutral reading site.[626]

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a 'speculative instrument' for the purpose of profiling and interpretation.. See J.H. Elliott, 'Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament: More Methods and Models' Semeia 35, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), p.1.

625 See Brett, Biblical Criticism, pp. 4-7; also Gutierrez, God of Life (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), p. xvii.

626 See for example Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, p. 5; P. Berger, The Social Reality of Religion (Middlesex: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 189; Mosala, Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology, p. 6; West, Contextual Bible Study, p.13.

The plurality of contexts and questions, suggests Brett, will mean that no one 'method', however rigorous, will answer all questions brought to the biblical text.[627] It logically follows that no one hermeneutic space, shaped and informed by its particular context, will answer all the questions brought to the biblical text. Yet historically it is clear that different methods have claimed this ability, as have both the academic and ecclesial hermeneutic spaces.

This claim, Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones suggest, has in turn led to claims of interpretive permanence, an interpretive temptation leading to the self-deception of thinking 'our words are God's words'.[628] An awareness of this tendency towards interpretive self-deception, they suggest, should 'compel us to learn to listen to outsiders'.[629]

Ordinary real-readers remain outsiders in the enterprise of biblical interpretation. They remain outside 'the guild of "proper" readers'.[630] It is this very 'otherness', even marginalisation in contemporary biblical studies, however, that reveals their *value* for contemporary hermeneutics in a number of ways.

Whether they should or not, ordinary real-readers read and interpret the biblical text. The accompanying volume of transcripts is empirical evidence that this is so. It is also clear from these transcripts that ordinary readers generally do not read the text with the same interpretive questions, tasks and agendas as professional readers. This often leads to the outright dismissal of such readings by those in the academic and ecclesial spaces, despite the inherent value of providing an alternative reading location for discussion of the biblical texts.

West, modifying a previous assumption that ordinary real-readers can only read pre-critically, states that ordinary readers *do* have the resources to read texts

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627 Brett, Biblical Criticism, p. 6 & pp. 11-26.
628 Fowl & Jones, Reading in Communion, p. 112.
629 Ibid.
630 West, 'Reading the Bible Differently', p. 25; note also Moore above in ftnt. 2.

critically, but they do so without 'access to the structured and systematic sets of resources that constitute the craft of biblical scholars'.[631] Consequently these readings are identified as naive, or merely satisfied with the 'plain' meaning of the text.

Nancey Murphy, in her search for a nonfoundational theological method, notes the work of Hans Frei in The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. Frei identified how for centuries biblical narratives were read realistically, assuming that in the first instance they are about what they first seem to be about. Frei observed how modern hermeneutics and theology (significantly the liberal approach) have taken them to be about something else - 'in biblical studies, in light of historical-critical methods, about the (very different) history *behind* the text; in theology, about the religious self-awareness of Jesus and his disciples, or existential orientation, or whatever.'[632]

Ordinary real-readers differ from these critical approaches, precisely because these approaches commence with a suspicion that the biblical texts misrepresent the teachings of Jesus, and that through the application of Cartesian rationalism expressed through critical methods the real history behind and subsequent meaning of the texts can be uncovered.[633] This critical interpretation in turn has created layers of meaning in the text, accessible only to the skilled exegete who understands the rules and regulations supporting each 'layer'. The ordinary real-reader is usually unaware of the idea that the biblical text is misleading the reader, and consequently more readily accepts the plain meaning as useful for appropriating contemporary meaning from the biblical text.[634]

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631 West, 'An Introduction: How We Have Come To "Read With"', Semeia 73, p. 7.

632 Nancey Murphy, Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism : How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set The Theological Agenda (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1996), p. 96.

633 Ibid., p. 21.

634 'Once you start to try to see all kinds of special meanings in some of this stuff, you really lose the plot. There's nothing mystical here it's straightforward teaching about how we should behave. Even if it is difficult to do it. The Lord is telling us as it is. There's no need to make it complicated.' Glebe Group Two, reading Luke 6: 39 - 42, in Volume Two, p. 19. See also Surry Hills Group, Ibid., pp. 169-170.

As a dialogue or conversation partner with the academic and ecclesial subjects, the value of ordinary real-readers is apparent. Their readings provide a useful heuristic tool to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion, not to the biblical text, but to the layers of critical readings, that have for considerable time obscured through the lens of supposed objectivist rationalist scientific enquiry the plain meaning of the text. Free from the rules and regulations of both academic biblical guilds and normative ecclesial rules, this 'space' of freedom can allow for meaning in texts, obscured by critical theory, to gain fresh clarity.

Ordinary real-readers also provide a different *context* within which biblical texts are read. These contexts are more likely to be shaped by a variety of life experiences and local ideologies than by a set of criteria according to which reading must be performed. In this sense these contexts are more likely to be 'other' than 'same'. The value and importance of the 'otherness' of the biblical text in Gadamerian terms is recognised by many scholars. Thiselton is but one example, stressing the important role the otherness of the text has in terms of contemporary interests and historical meaning.[635] It appears little acknowledgment is given to the value of the otherness of those who read the biblical text in a place outside the academic and ecclesial spaces, or their potential value in guarding against the fusing of the text with critical readers' contemporary interests, or their value for the academic and ecclesial spheres in maintaining interpretive humility and openness.

Conrad draws a parallel between ignoring the otherness of the text and ignoring the otherness of those outside the 'guild':

> The leadership of the church - white, middle class and male - ignores or attempts to correct the voices of the "other": women, the theologically inarticulate, the homeless, the younger churches . . . The church has been so busy talking it has forgotten how to listen. It should not be surprising, therefore, that we have treated the bible, an alien "voice" in our midst in the same way. We do all the talking, all the re-shaping, and all the refining, until it ceases to be other and then we make it speak.[636]

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635 Thiselton, Interpreting God, p.56; cp. Fowl & Jones, p. 112.

636 Edgar W. Conrad, 'The Bible and the Reader' Colloquium 23.2, 1991, p. 53.

Accepting the contribution of 'others' to the contemporary hermeneutic process, James Olthuis contests, is both a response to the crisis of reason in modernity and a necessity in developing less oppressive ontologies and epistemologies.[637] Totalising reason has identified difference as deviant, 'as a threat to be denied, marginalised, or annihilated'. Knowing *other*-wise, suggests Olthuis, is one way in which classist, racist and masculinist myths, perpetrated by the 'disinterested and dispassionate investigator with his pure, uncontaminated-by-context knowledge', can be unmasked and dismantled.[638]

The value of the 'other', the one who is marginalised, but no longer absent from the hermeneutic conversation, and recognised in their legitimate 'otherness', is their provision of a strategy, focus or possibility 'of reading which subverts hierarchy by focussing on marginal elements that stand in contradiction to an over-riding ideology.'[639] This value is also evident when readings by ordinary real-readers are accepted as a possible tool of self-criticism within the academic and ecclesial spaces. 'Otherness' and 'difference' within the hermeneutic space inhabited by ordinary real-readers are matters to which we will return.

This value of ordinary real-readers for contemporary biblical studies and the contemporary hermeneutic conversation is dependent, however, on the extent to which ordinary real-readers are present in the discussion. Empirical ordinary real-reader research is essential for the full value of ordinary real-readers to be evaluated and appropriated.

But is their presence legitimate? Are their readings valid?

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637 James H. Olthuis (Ed.), Knowing *Other*-wise : Philosophy at the threshold of spirituality (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 1.

638 Ibid., pp. 5 - 7.

639 Brett, 'Biblical Studies and Theology: Negotiating the Intersections', Biblical Interpretation 6.2, 1998, p. 133.

The legitimacy of ordinary real-readers

Acceptance and recognition of the legitimacy of a hermeneutic space in which ordinary real-readers have an authentic place remains a point of contention. To what extent can their readings be regarded as legitimate and valid for the purposes of biblical studies and as a contribution to the hermeneutic enterprise? Chapter One of this thesis identified some limitations, including particularity, fancifulness, and ideological commitment, of ordinary real-readers. Such limitations, however, did not inevitably produce illegitimate readings of the Gospel of Luke.

The issue raises the question of who decides what is a legitimate and valid reading or interpretation of a biblical text? Graeme Chatfield, in a lecture to the New South Wales Baptist Historical Society entitled 'Can the Laity Read and Understand Scripture? A Sixteenth Century Debate Continues', notes that during a lecture at Morling College, students training for ministry engaged in debate about the nature of authority possessed by the pastor as preacher/teacher.[640] The group was sharply polarised between those who argued that due to theological training a pastor has both the authority and responsibility to declare the Word of God and that those who sit under such instruction *are* to accept it, and those who argued that this view of ministry was contrary to the Baptist emphasis on the Lordship of Christ, the Supremacy of Scripture, the priesthood of all believers, and that such prescriptive power would be to deny that those without theological training could read and understand Scripture.

Chatfield's interest with the discussion is as a church historian. He makes this astute comment:

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640 Graeme Chatfield, 'Can the Laity Read and Understand Scripture? A Sixteenth century Debate Continues', Lecture delivered to the NSW Baptist Historical Society, March 1998; awaiting publication in Lucas, 1999.

> It was interesting . . . that a sixteenth century debate was re-enacted among students who claim 'membership' among a group known as evangelicals which by definition includes the adoption of the Reformation 'formal and material principles' and are *heirs to a tradition* which publicly acknowledges the *competency of all people* under the guidance of the Holy Spirit *to read and understand* the Scripture.[641]

Chatfield charts how this debate manifested itself in Zurich between 1519 and 1527, and the attitude held by Zwingli to the legitimacy of lay (ordinary) readings of Scripture. He notes that by 1522 Zwingli had committed himself, and Zurich, to the idea that the laity had the ability to read and understand Scripture and created places to facilitate this process, as well as translating the New Testament into the local dialect. By 1526, however, Zwingli had withdrawn this privilege, and the death penalty was decreed for any who persisted with the crimes of 'teaching in corners and special houses and places, teaching and having large meetings'.[642]

This change in understanding arose when the lay reading circles Zwingli had facilitated began to challenge Zwingli's, and that of his authorised preachers', interpretation of Scripture. The issue was clearly one of *power* and *control*. Lay reading circles became illegitimate and were replaced by an elite group of preachers, who had to be able to instruct in the biblical languages, as well as in Latin. Civil magistrates were used to enforce the legitimacy of the recognised preachers and the illegality of the laity reading, interpreting and preaching the biblical text.

Chatfield compares the hermeneutic of Balthasar Hubmaier with Zwingli noting similarities and differences. He suggests the major difference was Hubmaier's commitment to a position that pragmatically affirmed that the laity, untrained in Biblical languages and without a university education, could read and understand

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641 Ibid., p.1 (italics mine)

642 Ibid., p.4; cp. the trial of a chandler recounted by Rowland, "'Open Thy Mouth For The Dumb" A Task For The Exegete Of Holy Scripture', Biblical Interpretation, 1.2, 1993, p. 229.

Scripture. Hubmaier, Chatfield notes, did not live long enough to see the practical outcome of this approach, burnt at the stake as a heretic and seditionist.[643]

Reaction to ordinary real-readers (untrained laity), and their readings of the biblical texts historically reflects the loss of this strand of Protestant tradition. They remain suspect, naive, pre-critical and provoke dismissal or outright rejection. Crucial to this reaction, it appears, is the issue of power, although today the harshness of Zwingli's death threat extends only to readings or interpretations, not to readers themselves.[644]

Foregrounding the issue of power, and exposing the interpretive interests of those who wish to retain interpretive control within their spheres of influence, allows for the issue of the legitimacy of ordinary real-readers reading and interpreting Scripture to move forward.

Ordinary real-readers can be construed as having legitimacy within the Christian community because ordinary real-readers, like those engaged in this research, accept the Bible as a significant text that has shaped their life experience and will continue to shape their life experience. For these readers the Bible matters. It is not a neutral collection of stories abstracted from their lives. It is formative and informing for the way in which they live their lives and the meaning they give to this experience of living. As such, they have a legitimate place within the wider community of people who view the Bible in the same way.

But what constitutes the legitimacy or validity of a reading? Who adjudicates between rival interpretations?

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643 Chatfield, pp. 4 - 7. Note is made of the commitment of Conrad Greble and Felix Manz and others who were to become the Swiss Brethen who maintained a commitment to the laity and their ability to read and interpret Scripture.

644 This has not been the case in many countries in the two-thirds World where reading the Bible amongst Base Ecclesial Communities, or in Apartheid South Africa could indeed lead to death.

Patte suggests readings are legitimate when they are, or 'are shown to be, properly grounded in the text and the context of the readers.[645] Patte suggests the fundamental error of 'European-American scholars' is the desire to demonstrate that readings with different conclusions are illegitimate, and therefore that the text has only *one* voice. Commenting on the work with ordinary real-readers in South Africa in Semeia 73 he states:

> Let us remember that an ordinary reading expresses the way in which readers are *affected* by the text. Since most African readers of the bible are people who have a strong sense of the religious authority of this text . . . and thus people who believe in the power of this text to affect their lives, one can be confident that their readings . . . reflect in each instance an actual voice, or dimension, or code of the text. In sum, even though ordinary readings (as any readings) are always in need of refinements . . . they can be said to be basically legitimate, even before critical readings make it explicit.[646]

But are the readings of ordinary real-readers only 'basically legitimate' waiting for critical readings to make them 'explicitly legitimate'? What is the role of criticism? For Patte, criticism does not determine which reading is legitimate and which is illegitimate, but sheds light on 'which epistemology and hermeneutical categories ordinary readings have used' on the basis that 'one epistemology is as good as another' and different epistemologies tune readers to different voices in the text.[647] Readings properly grounded in text and context, although different, should be regarded as legitimate and valid.

Tim Long engages in the search for alternative criteria for legitimacy to that of critical theorising in his article 'A Real-reader Reading Revelation'.[648] Referring to Gadamer, Derrida and Ricoeur as significant, although different, examples of the post-structuralist understanding that human subjectivity is formed through the interpretation of texts, Long argues that this mandates a real-reader reader-response criticism, as distinct from the text-centred reader-response criticism.

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645 Daniel Patte, 'Biblical Scholars At The Interface Between Critical and Ordinary Readings: A Response', Semeia 73, pp. 274 -275.

646 Ibid., p. 274.

647 Ibid., p.273.

648 Tim Long, 'A Real Reader Reading Revelation', Semeia 73, pp. 79 - 107.

Despite the differences between Gadamer, Derrida and Ricour, specifically in their understanding of language, Long asserts that 'for each *the reader is a maker of meaning* in the act of reading.'[649] Commenting on the work of David Bleich,[650] Long concludes: 'If interpretation of texts (of whatever kind) is critical to the formation of human subjectivity, then it follows that interpretation is inseparable from concrete human experience.'[651] Bleich's work, rooted in the analysis of real-readers reading specific texts, enables his critique of individualistic, technological post-Enlightenment objectivity, which, he suggests, ranks readings in terms of institutional definitions of 'quality' and 'legitimacy', with a penchant for paradox and abstraction. By contrast, Bleich is interested in language in terms of its social function, and reader self-disclosure becomes central to his understanding of dialogue.[652]

In light of this, explicit reader self-disclosure is crucially important, argues Long, because reading never occurs without an explicit reader, congruent with reader-response claims that the reader is part of the act of interpretation. However, and more importantly, this disclosure creates an egalitarian reading context in which the 'expert' can no longer hide, but must declare her/himself and be vulnerable and open in dialogue with others. Such disclosure suggests Long (following Bleich), creates a reading community, where the issue is not which is the best or better reading, the legitimate or the illegitimate reading, but *why* do readers read differently?[653]

The 'legitimacy' of any reading may better be construed, then, in terms of the self-disclosure of the explicit reader as part of the interpretation of the text,[654] a crucial moment in legitimating a reading. Itumeleng Mosala identifies this moment when

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649 Ibid., p. 80. (italics Long's).
650 Cp. Thiselton, New Horizons, pp. 528 ff, and discussion of Belich's work in chapter two.
651 Long, p. 84.
652 Ibid., p.85.
653 Ibid., pp. 85 - 86.
654 Ibid., p.89.

one recognises the agenda that determines one's approach to the text.[655] Ordinary real-readers will more readily engage this crucial step, untrained as they are in critical mechanisms designed to conceal this disclosure.[656]

Long notes that Moore's conclusion: 'For biblical studies the moral is plain: criticism is an institution to which real-readers need not apply',[657] identifies the problem but does not lead to a solution. In fact, it would appear that Moore remains a part of the 'institution' in light of his comments on the attempt by Temma Berg in Semeia 48 as a 'real-reader' reading of Mark. Long's comparison here is useful:

> In his attitude to Berg's reading, Moore shows himself to be typical of the institutional reader Bleich criticises, whose notion of critical reading is to discover which readings to exclude and which to include. Moore's typical approach should be set alongside of Bleich's . . . approach which accepts all readers in the reading community and their readings, without sacrificing critical judgements about accuracy . . .[658]

This research accepts that ordinary real-readers and their readings have a legitimate place and are valid readings of the biblical text to the extent they reflect a grounding in the text and the reader's context. This acceptance does not suggest they are better readings than others, but are legitimate for the purpose of dialogue and conversation with readings by other readers in other places.

Perhaps an answer to the legitimacy of ordinary real-readers reading the biblical text may come from ordinary real-readers themselves in the Glebe reading group, reflecting on Luke 10: 21- 24, and their self-disclosure as 'ordinary readers'.

> The really good bit of this lot of verses is in verse 21 - God chooses to reveal things to the children and not to the wise and intelligent - just like he put a child in front of the disciples in the power thing - so it is the ordinary person like you and I that God reveals what it's all about to. (G)

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655 Mosala, see discussion pp. 3 - 9.

656 Identifying our 'agenda' constituted the first meeting of each group in this research. See discussion in chapter two above.

657 Moore quoted in Ibid., p. 88.

658 Long, p. 88, ftnt. 9.

Isn't there a big lesson to be learnt there? (S)

Mean the same today?

Oh yes! (S) . . . just because you're university educated or better than other people, if you sit down and listen long enough you may learn something. God doesn't just go into the highways and byways and say you've got an IQ of 190 so I pick you or you're very clever and I'll pick you to tell my stories to. No. He picks the children, the little ones. (G)

Is this how it is understood today?

No, the men in power, or the people, not only men, in power, still think that they know more than the common throng and aren't really interested to listen to what the everyday person has to say. (G)

This verse says what we are doing here is OK! (S)

Are you saying that this verse validates what we have been doing here in our readings?

Yes! Yes! [general affirmation]

So reading and understanding the Bible today doesn't have to be in the hands of the trained academic and theologians, everybody is invited to read as its meaning is revealed to everybody?

Yes! It's even stronger because it says it's hidden from the wise. That's why we are like the disciples in verses 23 & 24, as we can sit here and read the Bible and we have the privilege of understanding it - and that's a good thing - and it gives us encouragement as well. (G) [659]

Acceptance and recognition of the legitimacy of ordinary real-readers does not endorse an anarchy of interpretive strategies, nor does it seek to legitimate *any* reading that ordinary real-readers arrive at. Ordinary real-readers and their readings require analysis through a process applicable to all readings or interpretations of the biblical text, a process to which we will return below.

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659 Volume Two, pp. 44 - 45 .

'First-world' Disadvantaged and Marginalised Ordinary Real-Readers - Social and Theological Location, Otherness and Difference.

Trans-contextual poverty and marginalisation

Poverty and marginalisation, life experiences identified in the author's particular first-world inner city context, are universal realities, most apparent within the two-thirds world. For some decades theologians from the two-thirds world have been advocating the recognition of 'readings from the underside'. The work of Latin American liberation theologians, reading biblical texts in light of their human experience of poverty, oppression and marginalisation, has led to a broader identification of those who are the 'underside'. It has also led to the realisation that European-American biblical scholars in both academic and ecclesial spaces have excluded and marginalised Asians, Africans, indigenous peoples in colonised countries, as well as those poor and marginalised in their own contexts, and excluded or dismissed exegetical discourse from these sources.[660] As Sugitharajah notes, the term 'third world' has acquired a more inclusive meaning: 'It is something that happens wherever and whenever socio-economic dependence in terms of race, class or sex generates political and cultural slavery . . .'.[661] To this more inclusive meaning must be added, within the ecclesial space, women and indigenous people, and people outside the dominant class in the church, who continue to be marginalised and ignored. Recognition and acceptance of any contribution to exegetical discourse from the 'underside' remains a matter of ongoing discussion, as well as outright rejection.[662]

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660 See Sugirtharajah, Voices, pp. 1 - 7.

661 Aloysius Pieris quoted in Ibid., p. 3.

662 See Martyn Newman, Liberation Theology *is* Evangelical, (Clifton Hill: Mallorn Press, 1990) for this discussion in an Australian context and John Vincent & Christopher Rowland (Eds.) Liberation Theology UK, (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 1995) for this discussion in a British context. For a range of broader discussion see R. Gibellini, The Liberation Theology Debate, (London: SCM, 1987), J. A. Kirk, Liberation Theology : An Evangelical View from the Third World (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979) and M. Novak, Will It Liberate? Questions About Liberation Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

In the author's Australian context, experiences and discourse from the 'third world' are generally regarded as irrelevant within an 'egalitarian' affluent society. The most common response to poverty 'overseas' is charity. Poverty 'at home' evokes a variety of responses evident amongst the reading groups themselves.[663] In most of Australian society arguments based on the relativity of poverty are used to confirm that 'real' poverty does not exist in the 'welfare state' of Australia. Those marginalised by Australian society are identified and portrayed through the media in a variety of ways. In the religious or ecclesial 'world' in the author's context, those marginalised expand beyond those marginalised in Australian society generally to include women, homosexuals, people suffering AIDS or HIV, single mothers, divorcees, as well as sex-workers, indigenous people and public housing tenants.

Review of accepted ideology, theology or ethics from the perspective of those experiencing poverty or marginalisation is dismissed as *perhaps* contextually relevant in other continents, but not in Australia. Exegetical discourse *from* first-world poor and marginalised Christians has been rarely considered in Australia. Advocacy on behalf of the poor and marginalised has been evident, but listening to what the first-world poor and marginalised have to say about the meaning of the biblical text in their contemporary context has remained an unexplored avenue of exegetical discourse. The value and legitimacy of ordinary real-readers applies when those ordinary real-readers are from poor and marginalised social and ecclesial locations, *and* there are both theological and sociological factors that *extend* the value and legitimacy of first-world poor and marginalised ordinary real-readers beyond ordinary real-readers in general.

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663 See in Volume Two: Military Chaplains Reading Group, pp. 86 - 87; Glebe Group One, pp. 1 & 3 - 4 and Glebe Group Two, p. 12 - 13, for contrasting examples.

Theological location and reading

Poverty and marginalisation are tangible 'flesh-and-blood' experiences for women and men located in the author's context in a first-world affluent country. The 'place' of those who suffer from poverty and marginalisation, within the overall 'plan of God', to borrow a term from John Squires,[664] has received a great deal of attention from theologians in the two-thirds world, and some attention from theologians in the first-world. The concept of the epistemological privilege of the poor[665] has been reidentified as the 'underprivileged as the hermeneutic focus'.[666]

The work of Rojer Haight proves valuable for this discussion.[667] He identifies the question of human existence as the common broader issue, that is, the 'problem of history'[668] that theologies from 'north' and 'south' are required to address.

Adopting three central concepts of liberation theology (that the essence of human existence may be described as freedom, that this human existence is historical, and that human existence is also essentially and inescapably social[669]) he writes: 'The problem of human existence appears when one compares essential human existence with the concrete and actual reality of human existence'.[670]

It is the huge scale of social oppression, mass poverty and intense human suffering evident in the concrete and actual reality of human existence that raises, universally, in both the two-thirds and first 'worlds' the meaning of human existence within history.

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664 John Squires, The Plan of God in Luke-Acts, (Cambridge, CUP, 1993).

665 So confirms Gustavo Gutierrez: "I have the profound conviction that historically speaking the preferential option for the poor in the process of liberation is the starting point for an encounter with the Lord, for a demanding discipleship and therefore for a spirituality', in Gibellini, p. 84; see also Samuel Rayan, "Irruption of the Poor: challenges to Theology", Concilium, 187,1986, p.101; J. M. Bonino, Toward a Christian Political Ethics (London: SCM, 1983), p.111.

666 Sugitharajah, Voices, pp. 436 - 437.

667 Rojer Haight, An Alternative Vision (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 33 - 42.

668 Ibid.

669 Ibid., pp. 33 -34.

670 Ibid., p.34.

> It should be clear at this point that the issue of the social existence of humanity is a theological problem. Anthropology and theology become one at this point. The existence of vast amounts of human suffering and oppression, of fated and unfree existence, calls into question both the meaning of human existence itself and the reality of a God that is claimed to grant it meaning from the outside. The sheer existence of massive unfree and closed human existence demands an inquiry into the nature of God, Creator and provident.[671]

The existence and reality of tangible and visible poverty and marginalisation forces the contemporary hermeneutic and interpretative agenda to address a fundamental question: when suffering exists in this human form, what does it say about God's presence and activity in the world?

Interpretive strategies formulated from the perspective of European-American biblical scholarship have repeatedly spiritualised, neutralised or patronised alternative interpretative strategies that take the reality of suffering, poverty and marginalisation seriously and place the underprivileged as the hermeneutic focus.

Ultimately opting for the underprivileged ordinary real-reader as the hermeneutic focus is a *value* judgement. This is because any reading process involves choices. It involves choices about which voice or voices the reader will hear, as well as choices which reflect the contextual hermeneutic tools one uses which provide an epistemology for the reading.[672] A plurality of hermeneutic tools leads necessarily to a plurality of epistemological categories. As we have already noted, to avoid falling into the modernist trap of legitimating one at the expense of another, Patte concludes '*one epistemology is as good as another*'.[673]

However, while one epistemology may be as good as another, Patte argues that this does not mean that 'all readings and all epistemologies have the same value'.[674] He notes that several articles in the Semeia 73 volume strongly

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671 Ibid., p.36.
672 Patte, Semeia 73, pp. 269 -272.
673 Ibid., (italics mine).
674 Ibid., p. 275.

emphasise the need to choose between readings on the basis of a specific value judgement, a value judgement practised when 'one affirms the privileged option for the poor and oppressed'.[675]

> At this point it is no longer a matter of the privileged epistemology of the poor, . . . that is, of recognising the legitimacy of the epistemologies of popular religions and cultures. Such epistemologies bring about readings which affect people in quite different ways. . . Passing a value judgement in terms of the privileged option for the poor is opting for the readings which promote justice and true liberation and rejecting as evil those readings which prolong the oppression of the poor.[676]

But how does one define what is justice and truly liberating? Patte identifies at this point the *interpretive* priority of the disadvantaged ordinary real-readers, whose experience of poverty, injustice, marginalisation and oppression reveal what is truly liberating.

While one epistemology may be as good as another, the value of readings and epistemological options are not 'as good as each other'. In opting for justice and affirming the privileged option for the poor and marginalised, readings from these ordinary real-readers have *defining* value in the search for what is truly liberating - and for God's presence in the world.

It is at this point that Richard's identification of a third hermeneutic space takes on potentially liberating aspects. The theological value of the space inhabited by the poor and marginalised subject, the disadvantaged ordinary real-reader, is precisely because this place will raise interpretive questions and interests that define what justice is and what is truly liberating, and as such expose what is intentionally or unintentionally oppressive and evil in the academic and ecclesial hermeneutic spaces of power.

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675 Ibid.

676 Ibid., pp. 275-276.

This is evident in the transcripts of ordinary readings of Luke 6:20, in Volume Two. It is the experience of poverty, and its wretchedness, that facilitates an appropriation of the meaning of 'Blessed are you who are poor' by the readers in Glebe as words of great hope, because God could not possibly be endorsing poverty as some 'blessed' state. An alternative experience of middle-class material comfort elicited a completely different response by the military chaplains, one of whom was happy to throw the Gospel of Luke away.[677] Though perhaps naive, anachronistic and slightly humorous, the picture of Jesus as the first 'socialist' by Leigh Webster in the Glebe group should not be surprising. But it should be challenging to those who feel more comfortable with a non-political Jesus who endorses the capitalist status quo, or a free-market Jesus who endorses a prosperity gospel.

In a similar way the experience of marginalisation as women in both church and society led women in Woolloomooloo to appropriate the meaning of Jesus' words to Martha in Luke 10: 41, not as instruction to be submissive, but as a liberating invitation to engage in theological studies and reflection. As the transcripts confirm, women were able to read their context of marginalisation critically, which in turn shaped and informed their reading of the Lukan text.

Ordinary readers who live in life-sapping and paralysing situations of oppression, marginalisation and poverty suggests Hinga, *'necessarily* view the Bible as a life-giving and empowering resource',[678] and act as critical readers of oppression and marginalisation in their contexts of disadvantage. In this sense it can be argued that disadvantaged ordinary real-readers have a theological location of privilege if we make the value judgement that their human experience is a necessary hermeneutic focus. Such a value judgement is made by the author.

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677 See discussion in Chapter Four 'On Poverty and Riches'.

678 Teresia M. Hinga, '"Reading With": An Exploration of the Interface Between "Critical" and "Ordinary" Readings of the Bible: A Response', Semeia 73, p. 282 (italics Hinga's). Hinga notes: 'The discovery that 'ordinary readers' are in effect 'critical' readers in their contexts of oppression and that they will critically respond to oppression is an important stance for an "academic reader" who wishes to participate in a genuine reading with the oppressed.', p. 281.

Social location and reading

Arising from his understanding of ideology as a conceptual framework (rather than the more Marxian view of ideology as a false consciousness), Karl Mannheim came to the conclusion that 'every point of view is particular to a social situation'[679] and that adequate understanding or interpretation begins with a recognition of the social location of thought, 'to find out through analysis of what this particularity exists'.[680]

Sociologists like Peter Berger have developed the work of Mannheim, concluding that the starting point for any discussion of religion is to take seriously the 'character of religion as a human product'.[681] Rather than having ontological foundations, Berger insists that the 'world' and aspects of it, like religion, are socially constructed and created, communicated, and sustained through language and symbol, a 'world' Berger and Luckman have called a 'symbolic universe'.[682]

As Robin Scroggs points out this also includes language, even theological language: 'Thus theological language and the claims made therein can no longer be explained without taking into account socioeconomic-cultural factors as essential ingredients in the production of that language'.[683]

Sociology of knowledge approaches have often been dismissed as reductionist. That is not the intention of scholars working with social scientific tools. As Berger suggests:

> Only after the theologian has confronted the historical relativity of religion can he genuinely ask where in this history it may, perhaps, be

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679 Ibid., p.86.

680 Ibid., p.90.

681 Berger, The Social Reality of Religion, p. 189.

682 Berger & T. Luckman, The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise In The Sociology of Knowledge (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p.114.

683 R. Scroggs, 'The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research', New Testament Studies 26.2, 1980, pp. 175-176.

> possible to speak of discoveries - discoveries, that is, that transcend the relative character of their infrastructures. And only after he has really grasped what it means to say that religion is a human product or projection can he begin to search, within this array of projections, for what may turn out to be signals of transcendence.[684]

Over the past three decades a number of biblical scholars have built on sociology of knowledge approaches, with the firm conviction that the various documents making up the biblical texts 'exhibit a pervasive relationship between *kerygma* and context. . . between the religious affirmations of the early Christian communities and the social realities which affected them'.[685] This social-scientific approach takes context seriously. It is the historical context that is the object of analysis in this approach and how the social world, or location of the original authors and communities to which various texts were addressed, shaped and informed the biblical text's development. Esler is mindful that this approach also raises the question of what this might mean for the modern or contemporary audience. Whether meaning for a modern audience can ever be properly addressed without attending to the historical question he suggests, seems highly doubtful. This suggestion appears to hint at a commitment to the procedural priority of the historical approach. In support of this commitment Esler cites Gadamer.[686]

The Gadamerian insistence on understanding the horizon of the past in order to understand the horizon of the present has received considerable attention in hermeneutics.[687] Gadamer suggests that our horizon of the present, its self-understanding and analysis, depends upon our encounter with the past horizon and its traditions. This understanding of the past, suggests Esler, makes historical analysis indispensable. A fusion of the past and present horizons, in a state of continuous interaction, as opposed to assimilation, is key to this Gadamerian hermeneutical path.

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684 Berger, The Social Reality of Religion p.189.

685 Esler, The First Christians in their Social World : Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation (London: Routledge, 1994), p. ix; see also pp. 1 - 18.

686 Ibid., pp. 2 - 3.

687 Thiselton, The Two Horizons.

It appears logically plausible that if *historical* analysis is indispensable to an understanding of the horizon of the past, *contemporary* analysis is also indispensable for an understanding of the present horizon, precisely because postmodern theorising has revealed that there is no *one* uniform horizon of the present, but a plurality of contemporary horizons, which arise out of, and are shaped, not *only* by their past traditions, but their contemporary socio-economic, political, cultural and social locations or 'symbolic universes'. What has also become apparent is that those who are engaged in the field of historical analysis and reconstruction of the past generally inhabit one particular horizon in the present, as duly constituted subjects in either the academic or ecclesial hermeneutic spaces. Just as the original authors and audiences of the biblical texts were socially embodied and enmeshed in their first century worlds, so too, contemporary readers, including historians and professional readers, wherever they are located, are socially embodied, shaped and informed by their 'social world', or 'symbolic universe'.

It appears plausible to conclude, then, that it is highly doubtful whether the horizon of the past can be addressed, without *first* addressing the horizon of the present, through appropriate tools of contemporary analysis, for example, social analysis, ideology critique and so on, lest our reconstructions of the past merely reflect our present.

Athol Gill was one of the first Australian New Testament scholars to recognise the implications of our social embodiment:

> We need to recognise the socio-political and cultural presuppositions that we inevitably bring to the biblical text for it is these very same presuppositions that justify the way we select our texts and the relative weight we give them in our conclusions . . . I do not read the Bible in the same way as a poor black woman reads as she struggles to eke out an existence in the shanty towns of South Africa nor as a tribal elder who faces cultural genocide in the outskirts of Darwin, nor again as a young family might read it as they struggle to survive on the rubbish dumps of Mexico. . . When we come to realise that we bring our own history and culture, politics and economics to the Bible - that we come with our own biases and questions, our own fears and foibles,

> strengths and weaknesses - we have already learned a great deal about ourselves and about the texts we seek to interpret. We may then be in a position to appreciate the validity of the approaches and insights of those who have come to the text from vastly different social and political perspectives and be able to recognise the cultural captivity of much we claim to be biblical.[688]

All readers are socially located or socially embodied. Each 'social location' has dominant cultural, political, economic, religious and historical characteristics, or class distinctives. As discussed in chapter three, McGregor identifies different social locations or classes within the Australian context. Each class or social location may be said to be 'contextual', combining a range of ideological, cultural, social and religious factors into a 'world-view'.[689] As such, each social location is 'value-laden'.

The identification of the socially located, value-laden real-reader in both the academic and ecclesial spaces invites a similar identification of the socially located, value-laden real-reader in the ordinary/indigenous space. Ordinary real-readers, like professional real-readers in church and academy in the Australian context, largely inhabit the dominant social class McGregor identifies as 'the middle class'[690]. In similar fashion, numerous Church Life Surveys conducted in Australia over the past decade confirm that church congregations, comprised of a majority of ordinary real-readers, are overwhelmingly representative of this dominant middle-class.[691]

It follows that without the assistance of the tools of self and social analysis, most middle class ordinary real-readers of the biblical text will uncritically accept the myths of the dominant class in which they find themselves.[692] Their life experience

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688 Athol Gill, The Fringes of Freedom: Following Jesus, Living Together, Working for Justice (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer Books, 1990), pp. 1 - 2.

689 McGregor, pp. 20 - 47.

690 Ibid., pp. 134 - 154.

691 So Peter Kaldor, John Bellamy & Ruth Powell, Shaping A Future: Characteristics of Vital Congregations (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 1997), pp. 193 - 195; also Peter Kaldor, Who Goes Where? Who Doesn't Care? (Homebush West: Lancer, 1987), pp. 118 - 146.

692 As Takatso Mofokeng illustrates in his article 'Popular religiosity. A liberative resource and terrain of struggle', a dominant religion in society will invariably exhibit all the characteristics of a religion of the dominant class(es) in that particular society, in J. V. Nieuwenhove & B.

and social location will affirm and be affirmed by the 'middle-class' church culture and teaching within which they are enmeshed. In this scenario there will be two primary interlocutors, the biblical text and the dominant culture.

The possibility of introducing a new interlocutor arises when ordinary real-readers from outside the dominant middle-class enter into the process of biblical interpretation. Here a mutual questioning is at least possible, which was absent before, between the biblical text, the dominant culture, and a non-dominant culture inhabited by the disadvantaged and marginalised. Those *outside* the dominant class, in both church and society, will be *less* likely to reflect dominant political, socio-economic and cultural factors in a reading of a text than those who are enmeshed within it.[693] This in turn points to both a sociological as well as a theological necessity for readings from marginalised socially located real-readers, whose values, assumptions, socio-political and cultural presuppositions bring different questions and interpretive strategies to the biblical texts. In this sense it can be argued that there is a sociological, as well as epistemological, privilege for the poor and marginalised, disadvantaged ordinary real-readers, as they provide an alternative reading location to the dominant class-based reading locations of church and academy. Such an alternative social location will allow for the possibility of producing readings that in turn allow for analysis of what it is that shapes and informs ordinary and professional readings, and what effect within a particular context such readings have on those reading. Disadvantaged ordinary real-readers from a first-world social and ecclesial location of poverty and marginalisation have *particular* value in comparison to ordinary real-readers from the dominant middle-class because they are less likely to mirror dominant class values.

M. Goldewijk, (Eds.), Popular Religion, Liberation and Contextual Theology (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok, 1991), pp. 52ff.

693 See discussion below on 'Socially embodied human experience, ideological commitments and the reading process'.

This is evident in the readings produced in Woolloomooloo and Glebe, representative of the disadvantaged and marginalised, and the military chaplains' reading group, the latter representative of the dominant middle-class world-view. This has become further apparent since Volume Two was completed, after which the author facilitated contemporary readings of the parable of the Good Samaritan at a variety of teaching opportunities for ordinary real-readers representative of the Australian middle-class. Adopting the same approach taken initially by the Surry Hills group, and then used by the Glebe group, locating and retelling the story in the group's contemporary context, the identification of the Samaritan by middle-class ordinary readers in a contemporary role has been with the 'church' itself or a pastor or church worker. The casting of the role of the priest as a Baptist minister by the Surry Hills group, and the Levite in the Glebe group with a 'north shore snob' (where most middle-class people live), has produced a range of reactions from hostility to surprise.

This difference appears to support the suggestion made earlier that ordinary real-readers from disadvantaged and marginalised locations act as critical readers of oppression and marginalisation. Their critical readings from this location have the potential for revealing aspects of the text and how the text is appropriated within their contemporary experience, that are hidden to those from the dominant classes in church and society. The disadvantaged and marginalised identify the one who does not care for the plight of the suffering one, as exactly the same character (or structure) that the dominant classes assume does. It does appear that shaped and informed by their location of disadvantage and marginalisation, these readers define what is liberating and as such expose what is intentionally or unintentionally oppressive in church and society.

The nontotalising presence of otherness and difference

While ordinary real-readers can be said to constitute an *other* hermeneutic place, we have noted that even within this other hermeneutic place there will be varying

degrees of 'otherness'. Within the hermeneutic space of the ordinary real-reader, the subject may to varying degrees reflect the dominant class in church and academy, or their otherness may be constituted by their life experiences of poverty, marginalisation and oppression.

If, as David Harvey suggests, 'fragmentation, indeterminacy and intense distrust of all universal or "totalising" discourses . . . are the hallmark of postmodern thought',[694] then, as West points out, the demand for biblical scholars to prove they have *the* 'right reading' can be abandoned.[695] This in turn decentres the totalising interpretations of experts and allows for the interpretations of 'others', including the disadvantaged and marginalised - 'the *most* "other"'.[696]

Brett draws our attention to the varying degrees of otherness in his introductory comments to Ethnicity and the Bible.[697] Noting that discussions of ethnicity are part of the debates surrounding social groups, for which a crucial feature is self-definition, in order to answer the question who is 'us' and who is 'other', Brett draws on the work of Jonathan Z. Smith. Smith identifies degrees of otherness.[698] For example, there is 'us', 'like us', 'unlike us' and 'totally other'. Degrees of otherness, suggests Brett, are always a product of 'where one is standing' and represent a 'political and linguistic project', or, to use a familiar sociological term, a social construction of reality. Degrees of otherness in Australian society with respect to class distinctions are identified by McGregor.[699] In the same way, degrees of otherness are identified by the readers in the reading groups in a variety of ways.[700]

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694 David Harvey quoted in Thiselton, New Horizons, p. 88.

695 West, 'Reading The Bible Differently', p. 27.

696 Ibid. (italics mine).

697 Brett, Ethnicity, p. 10.

698 Ibid.

699 McGregor, Class, identifies non-dominant classes as the working class and the underclass, indicating degrees of otherness on the basis of social indicators such as access to housing, education, medical assistance, employment amongst others. See pp. 180 - 208 & 261 - 271.

700 A strong sense of otherness is expressed by the Glebe readers in terms of the acceptability of their readings for academics as we have noted above, and also for those in the church hierarchy'. Women identified this sense in a both the local Woolloomooloo context and in the wider church context. For some women this was expressed not in terms of

The ordinary real-readers, whose readings comprise the empirical reader research for this thesis, all inhabit varying degrees of 'otherness', depending on their social and ecclesial location. With the exception of the Military Chaplains, they represent in academy, church or society, positions of underprivilege and/or marginalisation, that *may* be identified as *most* other.

However, first-world disadvantaged ordinary real-readers in effect are not the *most* other, a *most* otherness reserved in Australian society for those images depicting starving children in African and Indian villages. It is probably a clearer depiction of poor and marginalised first-world ordinary real-readers within the author's context to be identified as 'proximate others'.[701] This 'proximate otherness' may elicit more hostility than 'most' otherness,[702] but this proximity may enhance the possibilities of their nontotalising presence, rather than inhibit it.

The *most* other are 'over there'. Their situation is external to first-world realities. But first-world disadvantage, made visible and identifiable in proximate poverty and marginalisation, is not so readily dismissed.[703] The same may apply to their exegetical discourse of biblical texts.

Totalising narratives are difference-blind. Brett indicates how in Australia those who operate with a 'difference-blind' liberalism engage in a political process which simply reflects the interests of the dominant culture.[704] The 'politics of difference' reveal that when difference or otherness is suppressed or ignored under the rubric of 'unity', the interests of the dominant culture are always served. The proximate

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exclusion from church based activities but the manner in which they were received on the basis of gender. See for example, Volume Two, Glebe Group Two, pp. 56 - 57, Women's Group One, pp. 176 - 177 and Women's Group Two, pp. 181 - 182.

701 Brett, Ethnicity, p.10.

702 Ibid., ftnt. 20.

703 Urban exposure visits, conducted by Baptist Inner City ministries for a wide range of students and church related groups, to the inner city of Sydney make this first-world disadvantage both visible and identifiable, with a quantifiable change in consciousness towards this disadvantage by the majority of participants engaged in such exposure visits.

704 Brett, Ethnicity, p. 5.

otherness of the poor and marginalised first-world real-reader 'provides a unique tool or place of reading *within* a first-world context to expose the totalising 'politics of unity' in both church and society that operate in favour of the status quo.

The presence of first-world disadvantaged ordinary real-readers in their proximate otherness calls for an open recognition of difference and diversity within our wider first-world context, and a recognition of the integrity of the other's position, in order to engage in dialogue and conversation that leads to nontotalising and therefore potentially liberating contemporary readings and interpretations of biblical texts.

The recognition of the integrity of the 'others' position in order to engage in potentially liberating dialogue or conversation does not just have an authentic place in the hermeneutic process in view of literary and sociological foundations.

The recognition of the 'other' is at the heart of the foundational event of Christian faith - the incarnation. Attention to the 'other' was, is and should be constitutive for Christian identity. The 'Word' - God in God's 'Otherness' - became flesh and entered into humanity's 'otherness', in order to engage in an open and liberating conversation of life. This incarnational event was not in order to dominate the 'other', but to offer open possibilities for life, and life in all its fullness. As Olthuis suggests, this dwelling amongst 'others': '. . . is a proactive being-with, especially with those who suffer, and, when appropriate, a robust pursuit of justice for the oppressed'.[705] Middelton and Walsh assert: 'In one sense . . . the charge of totalisation addressed to Christianity can only be answered by the concrete, nontotalising life of actual Christians, the body of Christ who . . . take up and continue the ministry of Jesus to a suffering and broken world. That is ultimately the only answer that counts.'[706] This nontotalising life of actual Christians has its

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705 Olthuis, Knowing *other*-wise, p. 249.

706 J. Richard Middelton & Brian J. Walsh, Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p.107. Middelton and Walsh also identify in the mettanarrative of the Scriptures 'antitotalising features', for example the Bible's pervasive sensitivity to suffering, God's overarching creational intent and the 'antitotalising mission of Jesus', pp. 102-205.

greatest nontotalising potential in the exegetical discourse of disadvantaged first-world ordinary real-readers. Attention to the otherness of such readers has a central Christological rationale.

However, readings from this context should not in turn become totalising discourses. Otherness or difference, suggests West, requires dialogue.[707]

West's particular concern in his 1994 article, 'Difference and Dialogue: Reading the Joseph Story With Poor and Marginalised Communities in South Africa',[708] is to formulate the relationship between difference and dialogue amidst the tension between the scepticism of postmodernism and the particular commitments of liberation hermeneutics. Drawing on the work of Kathleen Weiler[709] and Sharon Welch,[710] West notes that a recognition of 'social difference' in our postmodern world leads to a further recognition that individual and communal selves are 'always in the process of being constructed and negotiated' and that the forces in place whereby both individuals and communities are shaped require careful consideration.[711]

West, with Habermas, agrees that there is an imperative to enter into dialogue with others, but for Foucault's reasons:

> Foucault argues that we can see a system of logic as a particular system and not as truth itself only when we are partially constituted by different systems of producing truth. We can transcend the blinders of our own social location, not through becoming objective, but by recognising the differences by which we ourselves are constituted and, I would add to Foucault, by actively seeking to be partially constituted by work with different groups.[712]

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707 Cp. Thiselton for whom proper recognition and respect for the otherness of the 'other' requires listening, Interpreting God, p. 51.

708 Ibid., pp. 152 - 170.

709 Kathleen Weiler, 'Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference', Harvard Educational Review 61,1991, pp. 449-474.

710 Sharon D. Welch, A feminist ethic of risk (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

711 West, 'Difference and Dialogue', p.153.

712 Welch, p.151, quoted in Ibid.

This requires the recognition by those in church and academy of their particular social location, and the foregrounding of this social location as a difference between themselves and those who are disadvantaged real-readers. The shape of the dialogue will be built on this recognition, allowing for dialogue or reading *with*, as opposed to *to* or *for*, those from disadvantaged reading locations. The importance of this dialogue as a safeguard against totalising or self-serving readings in any location is discussed further below.

Contemporary Human Experience and Historical-critical Approaches - a search for truth.

As discussed in chapter two, a useful entry point into current biblical hermeneutics is the identification of three ways or *modes* of reading the Bible.[713] *Behind the text* approaches seek meaning through the contextualisation of the text within its historical world. The major concern is the reconstruction of the historical period in which the text was produced and the type of society that produced the text. *In the text* approaches seek meaning within the structure of the text itself, and are primarily interested in the literary world of the text. Extra-textual material does not play a significant part in this approach, which utilises literary devices to understand and appropriate the text. *In front of the text* approaches accept the final form of the text and view the text as a dynamic medium with a 'life' that exists long after the authors and their world have past. This 'relative autonomy of the text' allows for an *active* reader in the process of interpretation, the focus not on what the text meant in the past, but what it means for the present and the future. Unlike the other two modes of reading, where *appropriation* of the text for present meaning may not be considered necessary, for *in front* of the text approaches the appropriation of the text for the reader's present context is essential. Through a process of dialogue, suggests West, the world of the text is fused with the world of the reader, transforming both text and reader and offering the text a new way of speaking. Ordinary real-readers are more likely to read *in front* of the text primarily because

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713 So West, Contextual Bible Study, pp. 27 - 50, also Biblical Hermeneutics, pp. 131-164.

of their lack of access to critical tools of the academic and ecclesial hermeneutic spaces. West suggests that each way is different, but no one way is necessarily the 'best' way of reading and that these three approaches can overlap.

In the contemporary search for the meaning of ancient biblical texts, we are reminded of the suggestion of Philip Esler that it is doubtful that what texts might mean for a modern audience can be adequately discerned without attending to the meaning that the text had for the original audience(s).[714] This raises direct issues for the discussion of the relationship between contemporary human experience and the historical-critical approach. This does not imply that the historical-critical approach does not have a wealth of meaningful information to provide to the hermeneutic task. What is up for discussion is the suggestion that a *behind* the text reading is procedurally a priority in order to complete an *in front* of the text reading. On this issue biblical scholarship appears divided.[715]

Michael Bauman, in Evangelical Hermeneutics, clarifies one particular position of this divide, a position reflective of the evangelical view of Scripture in Sydney:

> If you are a student, please read carefully. I will explain how you can prevent any teacher who believes that a text means what the reader says it means rather than what the author says it means from marking any of your work wrong ever again, . . . most importantly I want to hear the voice of God . . . not the voices of modernist exegetes who think that the Bible's meaning has nothing to do with the intention of either the God who inspired it or the people who wrote it.[716]

Pablo Richard identifies an alternative position, suggesting that an indigenous context imposes the priority of life over the Bible and the priority of the present

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714 Philip Esler raises this issue in The First Christians in their Social Worlds, p. 2 as pointed out above. It is important to note that Esler raises the question in an open-ended manner. He does not say arriving at contemporary meaning *cannot* be achieved without the use of historical analysis, but that it is doubtful if it can be achieved. This position does not represent the *extremes* noted above.

715 See, for example, Watson, Text and Truth : Redefining Biblical Theology, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), especially chapter three 'Literal Sense, Authorial Intention, Objective Interpretation: In Defence of Some Unfashionable Concepts', pp. 95 - 126.

716 Michael Bauman, 'The Ethics of Meaning: The Case for a Conservative Hermeneutic' in Michael Bauman & David Hall, Evangelical Hermeneutics, (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1995), pp. 3 - 4.

over the past: 'The Bible cannot be presented as something archaeological, like a history of the past that one attempts to actualise. The Bible must be interpreted beginning with the present spirituality of the indigenous people'.[717]

Building on McKnight's analysis, the polarisation enhanced with the rise of post-modern theorising in biblical interpretation may be represented as follows:

text	diachronic	synchronic
text	professional reader	ordinary reader
text	first world	third world/poor in first world
text	universal	local[718]

What, if anything, do the readings of ordinary disadvantaged first-world real-readers contribute to this discussion?

The old question of experience or Scripture?

In foundationalist terms this discussion may appear little more than part of the ongoing debate in Anglo-American theology whether it is Scripture or religious experience that provides theology with a firm, even unquestionable, foundation. While this foundationalist approach is still held to, as evidenced by Bauman above, discussion needs to move beyond old questions.

Nancey Murphy clearly identifies that both the liberal endeavour to find a foundation in religious experience, individualistic and possibly indescribable, and the fundamentalist or conservative evangelical endeavour to find a foundation in Scripture through the claim to inerrant original, but inaccessible autographs, have both failed.[719] Murphy proposes an alternative position called 'holism'.[720] Building

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717 Richard, p. 309.

718 See McKnight, Postmodern Use of the Bible, p. 93 ff.; cp. Walter Bruggemann, The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts Under Negotiation (London: SCM, 1993), pp. 6ff.

719 Murphy, Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism, pp. 11 - 82.

720 Ibid., p.88.

on the work of W.V.O. Quine,[721] Imre Lakatos and Alasdair MacIntyre,[722] and thus rejecting Cartesian and Kantian dualism, Murphy proposes a useful definition of 'holism': 'I presuppose a holist conception of the person, a nonreductive physicalism according to which human mental and physical capacities arise out of the complex ordering of our physical selves in their social environment'.[723]

Murphy notes how the Yale school attempted to recover a 'traditional reading strategy' in response to the work of Hans Frei, particularly his suggestion that modern hermeneutics and theology have approached the biblical texts assuming that they are not about what they at first seem to be about.[724] This in turn has led to a recognition of the role of the *community* in interpretation, how understanding is bound up with communal practices.

Murphy notes that these same scholars in the Yale school reject any attempt to bring the Bible into the modern world and argue that contemporary interpreters must instead attempt to enter the world of the Bible. In order to guarantee an authoritative role for Scripture, their conception of interpretation, suggests Murphy, parallels MacIntyre's account of traditions as essentially 'socially embodied applications of formative texts - we *live* in our traditions and can only think and perceive by means of the categories, images, stories they provide'.[725] As Murphy notes, however, while this definition of tradition guarantees an authoritative role for Scripture, it *also* guarantees a role for experience:

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721 Murphy credits the beginning of the end of the modern period with the publication of Quine's essay ' Two Dogmas of Empiricism'. Quine provided a new image of knowledge as a web or net: 'The totality of our so-called knowledge of beliefs . . . is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change te figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions re-adjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. Re-evaluation of some statements entails re-evaluation of others . . . No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through the considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole'. See discussion on epistemological holism, pp. 88 - 90.

722 See Ibid., pp. 89 - 93,

723 Ibid., p. 93, see also pp. 149 - 151.

724 Ibid., p. 96.

725 Ibid., p.105, (italics Murphy's). This would seem to be all the more reason one could argue for dialogue with others.

> The emphasis on *social embodiment* and application of the texts is another consequence of the Anglo-American postmodern recognition that language and knowledge are not over against the world, and therefore needing to be compared or related to it, but rather that language and knowledge are part of the social world. That there can be no theology that does not in one way or another take account of contemporary experience follows from this emphasis on social embodiment. . . Consequently, experience is just as necessary a contributor to theology as the formative texts, and the opposition between Scripture and experience as sources of theology dissolves.[726]

This understanding of 'experience' is essentially different from the liberal concept of individualistic, religious experience. A new, holistic approach understands experience is *socially embodied*. This experience is not an individualistic religious experience, disembodied from physical realities, or from how such physical realities are experienced in light of the political, economic, social and cultural realities of total human experience. Murphy's definition of holism provides us with the possibility of moving beyond the old dichotomies of experience or Scripture forced upon us by centuries of dualistic Platonic translations and interpretations of Scripture.

The text itself, the authors and the original audiences, traditions and contemporary readers were and are *socially embodied*. Social embodiment is the totality of human experience within particular contexts, whether contemporary or historical. The conservative evangelical dogmas of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*, are unsustainable. Neither Scripture nor faith is *alone*. They have always existed, and currently exist, within a socially embodied context or lived experience.

For hermeneutics the essential place of 'lived experience' has already been identified. As Thiselton notes within a volume titled New Words: A Dictionary of Neologisms Since 1960, hermeneutics is defined 'in its new use since 1965' as 'the theory and method of interpreting meaningful human action'.[727] Thiselton draws attention to the editor's note suggesting this new use has developed from

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726 Ibid., pp. 105-106.

727 Quoted in Thiselton, Interpreting God, p. 47.

its previous use in referring to textual variants and philology to the 'way in which lived human experience is studied by looking both at individuals and at the world-view of which they are a part'. Thiselton concludes that reflection on the interpretation of texts has led to a '*hermeneutics of lived experience*'.[728]

While 'common human experience', in David Tracey's terms, may reflect trans-contextual experiences of social embodiment and lived experience, identification of the contextual socially constructed nature of our social embodiment reveals to us that human experience is not common, but different, and, as argued above, this difference cannot be ignored or subsumed under some totalising order.[729]

The old question, Scripture or experience?, is replaced by a new question - which or whose experience? The author's socially embodied experience or the reader's socially embodied experience? The professional theologians' socially embodied experience or the disadvantaged ordinary real-reader's socially embodied experience?

Here we return to the consideration of the procedural question identified above.

Text, context, reading and meaning.

> Even more so today for us than the centurion, all we have is the history. The Bible is our history book of what Jesus said and did. We have that to look back on so we accept the words that we hear in the story and go by our experiences of what we see in every day life and the many miracles that still occur if you are willing to see them. (S)[730]

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728 Ibid.

729 David Tracey Blessed Rage For Order: the New Pluralism in Theology (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), describes himself as a revisionist theologian, an approach that holds that 'a contemporary fundamental Christian theology can best be described as philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in common human experience and language and upon the meanings present in the Christian fact [or tradition; cf. page 34]', p.25. The question is proposed does this lead to a rejection of experiential foundationalism in favour of an interaction between experience and tradition contributing equally to a resulting theology? Tracey answers 'the scriptural claim that Christian self-understanding expresses an understanding of authentic human experiences to be tested against the criterion of adequacy to common human experience', p.44; see Murphy p. 25.

730 Volume Two, p. 21.

Will the commentary be helpful? (G)

Possibly. It will attempt to say what it may have meant then, whereas we are saying what it means today.

Maybe you need both the experts and those of us reading today to make sense of it. (S)[731]

The ordinary real-readers represented in Volume Two were aware of the historical dimension of the biblical text they were reading. The importance of commentaries was noted on a number of occasions, although the focus remained the contemporary meaning of the text for the readers. The transcripts reveal that interpretive readings in the Gospel of Luke did take place, and did so without recourse to historical material as the procedural first step in the process of reading the text.[732]

If the historical-critical approach to locating meaning *behind* the text *has* to be procedurally *a priori,* then ordinary real-readers will always be dependent upon secondary sources and the historical reconstructions of professional readers in church and academy, and their hermeneutic space will always be marginalised and dependent. As Conrad points out:

> The interpretive strategies of the historical-criticism concerned with probing for meaning behind the text have the opposite effect to that of facilitating reading. Textual analysis has become so complex that the practice of historical-criticism has created a gulf between its practitioners and ordinary readers. Rather than facilitate reading, historical-criticism with its prolific production of larger and larger commentaries, has the effect of convincing ordinary readers that they cannot read the text meaningfully. The biblical text is only available through the secondary works of the biblical scholars themselves.[733]

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731 Ibid., p. 45.

732 The primary focus for all reading groups was 'what does the text mean for you today?' In my role as the facilitator, interventions that introduced historical-critical material were deliberately resisted. I was interested in discovering if the readers could interpret the text without these critical tools and from the perspective of their contemporary experience.

733 Conrad, 'The Bible and the Reader', p. 53. I make this criticism of Sinclair's work with ordinary readers in Edinburgh in chapter one. See also Rowland & Corner, Liberating Exegesis, p. 66, who argue: 'Indeed much of what passes for the "historical-critical" method, while it is presented as a tool for extracting "the meaning" of the text, in effect distances the contemporary reader from the very world of the biblical writers which it is intended to uncover, and certainly fails to understand their own intentions'.

The question arising out of previous discussion is to what extent historical reconstruction can be free from the socially embodied interpretive interests that shape and inform the historical critic's reconstructions, even before they are constructed.

If text, context, reading and meaning are socially embodied[734], as Alfredo Fierro asserts, a theologian or reader of the biblical texts can never avoid social determination, but can only choose by what kind of social determinants or interpretive interests ideas are fashioned.[735] But acknowledgment of one's social determinants and interpretive interests remains the crucial question for objective critical theorising. Most certainly claims to objectivity in current biblical scholarship have not been abandoned despite post-modern theorising.[736] Motivation for an insistence that authorial intention and objective *behind the text* approaches must procedurally be *a priori* in working with other approaches is a desire to protect the meaning of the biblical text from being dissolved into a plurality of meanings merely reflecting contemporary concerns. But as Rowland and Corner point out, much historical-critical work, rather than extracting the meaning of the text has more often than not had the effect of distancing the contemporary reader from the world that the historical-critical method is intended to uncover.[737]

If, whether we like it or not, we all 'set out' as women and men, from 'real', 'active', 'lived' human experience, as Conrad points out, the crucial question for the historical critical paradigm is: what are the interpretive strategies that the historical-critical readers of the Bible bring to the text and confuse with the text's

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734 Social embodiment of human experience does not reduce religious experience to materialism. In terms of Murphy's definition above both the transcendent and physical, mental and material are combined in human experience rather than identified in dualistic terms. It is not being suggested that faith is solely the product of social context and has no transcendent referent.

735 A. Fierro, The Militant Gospel (London, SCM, 1977), p.382. See also discussion in Daniel Smith-Christopher, (Ed.), Text & Experience: Towards A Cultural Exegesis of the Bible, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 12 - 22.

736 Watson, Text and Truth. It appears that Watson may take up the original concern that the biblical theology movement had, which was to make sure that the text was freed from the subjective input of readers intent on making the text say whatever the reader wanted it to say.

737 Rowland & Corner, Liberating Exegesis, p. 66.

intention to speak for itself?[738] In failing to understand their own intentions, and being coy about 'owning up' to their own socially embodied interpretive interests, an even more crucial question arises. Whose political, social, economic, cultural and religious interests have these interpretive strategies served when biblical scholars have reached their historical conclusions?

In order to proceed meaningfully in light of the identification of the active socially embodied real-reader, a methodological suggestion, that 'sociology of the New Testament must involve a penetrating analysis of the social formation of the reader too',[739] becomes a *crucial* step in the procedural relationship between historical reconstructions and contemporary human experience. Hence '. . . the pressing issues for any critical exegesis must be the rigorous analysis of the complex production of meaning, the contexts in which that production takes place, and the social and economic interests which an interpretation is serving.' [740] Those engaged in historical reconstruction so as to maintain scholarly integrity should precede their reconstructions with an analysis of their contemporary historical location. In this way the social, political, ecclesial, cultural and economic social fabric in which the historian or Bible reader completes his/her work will be foregrounded and acknowledged as of equal importance in establishing the social, political, ecclesial, cultural and economic social fabric in which the text was written or the author lived. In this sense it can be argued that social analysis of the contemporary social, cultural, political and ecclesial location of the biblical scholar, by the biblical scholar, should be a prerequisite for biblical studies.

This has major implications, suggests Majella Franzmann, for practitioners of the historical-critical method, demanding a 'two-pronged hermeneutic' of 'reader and text'.[741] Similar attention given to the socio-political community from which the text arose is required for the socio-political affiliations of the contemporary professional

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738 Conrad, 'The Bible and the Reader', p. 50.
739 Rowland & Corner, Liberating Exegesis, p. 37
740 Ibid., p. 40
741 Majella Franzmannn, 'Response to Edgar W. Conrad, The Bible and the Reader', Colloquium 23/2, 1991, p.57.

reader in his or her own scholarly world. Recognising that one's readings are only *one* way of reading should lead the professional reader into a process of dialogue or conversation with readers from other worlds in order to ensure that authoritative claims are claims in process of review with those who are different. In circular fashion, we have returned to the value and importance of otherness and difference.

Recognition of the value of contemporary human experience in comparison with the value of historical-critical approaches were raised earlier this century by biblical scholars like Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann.[742] So what is the value of historical-critical approaches for reading the biblical text in our world today? Obviously the value of allowing the text a place as an historical 'other' is paramount, precisely to safeguard against the text being dissolved into the reader's own world. The value of historical otherness for the way in which the military chaplains appropriated the meaning of Luke 6: 27[743], in effect neutralising the text and rendering irrelevant the teaching of Jesus concerning love of enemies for those in contemporary military contexts, is apparent.[744] It was acknowledged by the Surry Hills reading group that an appropriation of the parable in Luke 14: 15 - 24 was immensely enriched by the insights of Richard Rohrbaugh and his model of a first-century pre-industrial city. The historical reconstruction of the location of the parable within this first-century context was identified as useful for an understanding of what shape the contemporary church should take in an inner city location of disadvantage like Woolloomooloo.[745] Historical material was requested

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742 In The Epistle To The Romans, (London: OUP, 1933 ed.) p. 11, Karl Barth writes: 'Moreover, judged by what seems to me to be the fundamental principle of true exegesis, I entirely fail to see why parallels drawn from the ancient world-and with such parallels modern commentators are chiefly concerned-should be of more value for an understanding of the Epistle than the situation in which we ourselves actually are, and to which we can therefore bear witness'; and R. Bultmann, 'Are we to read the Bible only as an historical document in order to reconstruct an epoch of past history for which the Bible serves as a 'source'? or is it more than a source? I think our interest is really to hear what the Bible has to say for our actual present, to hear what is the truth about our life and about our soul.' in 'The Problem of Hermeneutics', Essays Philosophical and Theological,(London, SCM Press, 1955), pp. 241-242.

743 Volume Two, pp. 106 - 107.

744 So the conclusion of the military chaplains in Ibid., p. 107: 'The text is black and white as well. It is not about limited rules of engagement and it's not talking about life and death situations, so it 's not really relevant to soldiers, or to us a chaplains in the military.'

745 Ibid., p. 152.

by the Glebe reading group in order to make sense of Jesus' exhortation 'to leave the dead to bury the dead', in view of the offence such a suggestion had for the readers in their contemporary world.[746]

Yet readers *were* able to read and appropriate the meaning of the text without historical information.[747] While *behind* the text approaches will always have value for biblical interpretation, for disadvantaged ordinary real-readers, their socially embodied contemporary human experience *must* be prior procedurally to historical-critical approaches, for *their* readings to emerge.

Socially embodied human experience, ideological commitments and the reading process.

> There are things hidden by people in the Bible, and there are bits of the Bible that get overexposed, like 1 Timothy chapter 2. That's used by men all the time.[748]

Sheila Briggs argues that a consequence of post-Enlightenment critical theorising was to integrate the Bible as an object of criticism into modern culture. As an 'ideological artefact' it became inscribed with the ideals of the emerging bourgeoisie, intent on utilising critical methods to overturn the assumption that the autocratic classes were the 'necessary order of things' by making the Bible reflective of, and therefore legitimating, their 'sense of themselves as pursuing a scientific, humane and tasteful way of life'.[749] When modern biblical criticism exposed these 'traditional values' as historical invention, she argues it is no surprise that the middle-class who held to these values turned to pietism or conservative evangelicalism and bitterly opposed such modern criticism.

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746 Ibid., p. 43.

747 See for example Glebe Group Two and Women's Group Three regarding role of Pharisees in the stories being read, a role identified without an historical understanding of who the Pharisees were in Ibid., pp. 30 & 206.

748 Mary Jago, Women's Group Two, Ibid., p. 204.

749 Sheila Briggs, 'The Deceit of the Sublime: An Investigation into the Origins of Ideological Criticism of the Bible in Early Nineteenth-Century German Biblical Studies', Semeia 59 (Scholars Press: Atlanta: 1992), p.1.

The conclusion appears obvious:

> Biblical criticism therefore has a double character: it is a means simultaneously for creating ideology and for ideological critique. As such it is part of the broader development of scientific disciplines and branches of knowledge in bourgeois society from the nineteenth century onwards.[750]

Ideological criticism has the possibility of revealing 'the things hidden by people in the Bible' and explaining why some 'bits' get 'overexposed'. But ideological criticism is fraught with difficulties, as the critic her/himself is ideologically committed, and must identify and justify that commitment from which the critique takes place. For Christian critics, this also requires a theological justification - to this issue we will return.

Recognition of the social embodiment of lived human experience engenders a parallel recognition that there is no discourse free from ideological and other presuppositions. The readings contained in Volume Two of this thesis are ideologically laden, whether this ideological commitment by the readers is recognised or not. Likewise, the readings and interpretations of those in church and academy are ideologically laden, whether the readers in these contexts recognise this or not.

The author of this paper is ideologically committed, 'partially constituted' in this commitment, to use West's term, through close daily contact with those in Australian society and church who are disadvantaged and marginalised.[751] The author is also partially constituted by a theological commitment that asserts that the way in which the Gospels speak of Jesus provide a strong account, and a contemporary standpoint, from which to confront and question dominant cultural and political ideologies. This standpoint has been identified above in our

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750 Ibid.

751 West, 'An Introduction: How We Have Cone To "Read With"', p. 9 and 'Reading The Bible Differently', pp. 37 - 38.

discussion of theological location and the identification of a Christological commitment to those underprivileged and marginalised.[752]

A challenge, already identified above, for all readers and reading communities, is the task of 'owning up to' our ideological commitments, and how these commitments affect the questions and interpretive agendas and strategies we bring to the process of reading. This requires acceptance that discourse is not value-neutral and the acknowledgment of one's biases, as analytical *starting points* and hermeneutical principles. Hinga suggests this acknowledgment has the potential to enrich and challenge scholars 'to be accountable not only to the academy but also to the people and contexts in which they do their scholarship.'[753] Hinga hints at the way in which such self-analysis and acknowledgment might be possible when she encourages biblical scholars to engage with those who are oppressed.

Briggs confirms this possibility:

> To hold oneself morally accountable as a scholar to the experiences of a socially marginalised group, as the group itself articulates them, and to consider the ideological effect of one's research as part of one's scholarly results, is a goal sought by many engaged in ideological criticism of the bible. The experiences of the oppressed, their subjectivities, become the mirror of utopias, which are the political alternatives to the state or to the postmodern dispersions of its power.[754]

Readings that commence from an alternative ideological starting point to that of the dominant discourse of biblical scholarship can serve as a tool for critical self-examination by biblical scholars of their own ideological presuppositions *if* they are open to reading with 'others' and listening to their exegetical discourse. The readings of disadvantaged ordinary real-readers can be a useful heuristic tool of suspicion with which to analyse readings from biblical scholars in church and

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752 See Laurie Green, 'Gospel From The Underclass', in Chris Rowland & John Vincent, (Eds.), Gospel from the City (Sheffield: UTU, 1997), pp. 121-125.

753 Hinga, p. 278.

754 Briggs, p. 18.

academy. If engaged as part of an intentional strategy to listen to voices that have normally been excluded, a reading strategy can emerge that deconstructs dominant readings.[755]

But what of the ideological commitments of disadvantaged ordinary real-readers? Are they beyond critical analysis? Are they more than just a reflection of the dominant hegemony cemented together by the ideological commitments of the powerful that surround them? As Sinclair has illustrated, utilising the work of Parkin,[756] Gramsci's central thesis,[757] and Steven Luke's argument, power can prevent people thinking certain things.[758] In his work with ordinary readers in Edinburgh, a dominant ideology was evident in all the reading groups in his research project. He suggests this necessitates a method 'for the development of alternatives to ideological domination,' a method 'crucially concerned with the move from the theoretical and the contemplative to the concrete and the active.'[759]

The theories of dominant ideology and how they operate in practice, can be identified, not from some value-neutral ideologically-free vantage point removed from lived human experience, but from the contemporary lived human experience

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755 Brett, 'Biblical Studies and Theology: Negotiating the Intersections', p.133.

756 Sinclair, p.104 The meaning systems referred to are discussed by Sinclair in chapter ten and are developed by Parker in his book Class Inequality and Political Order. As Sinclair elaborates, Parkin suggests 'facts ' do not of themselves provide meaning, rather what is required is an analysis of the 'meaning systems' by which those facts are understood. He delineates three meaning systems:
-the dominant value system (source: major institutional order)
-the subordinate value system (source: local working class community and promotes accommodation)
-the radical value system (source: working class political party and promotes opposition)
Essential to this analysis is Parkin's suggestion (based on the work of Merton), that 'a major source of tension in modern society lies in the fact that members of the subordinate class internalise the same values as the dominant class, but lack the means for realising them'. See discussion in Ibid., pp. 315-324.

757 Sinclair summarises this as follows:
*the power of ideas is part of economic and political power
*those at the centre of hegemony do not recognise their abuse of power due to 'common sense' which can be the result of the history of domination
* Gramsci sought to develop a way of making the ideas of a marginalised social group coherent enough to challenge the ideas of those who had marginalised them. See Ibid., pp. 301ff.

758 Citing Steven Lukes, Power, A Radical View, he notes his central point being: '. . . power can prevent people thinking certain things, as well as prevent them doing certain things. This is hegemony - the control of the options open for consideration and the consequent power over the decisions made. This control, or power, is not the property of individuals but of groups...' in Ibid., p.306.

759 Ibid., p. 312.

of concrete and active disadvantage and marginalisation. When dominant ideology is oppressive for some and not for others, it is the particular and concrete experience of those who are oppressed and exist in contradiction to the claims of those who benefit from and perpetuate dominant ideologies, that provides the potential for a vantage point from which dominant 'common sense' can be critically assessed.[760] From this position of contradiction can arise an alternative that articulates a different perspective. When contemporary lived human experience of disadvantage and marginalisation is foregrounded and allowed to speak as the starting point for biblical interpretation, then the possibility arises for a theological critique to emerge that calls into question dominant oppressive ideologies. The question to what extent one ideological commitment is better than another returns us to our previous conclusion by Patte, that a value judgement is required in favour of commitments that liberate and renew life possibilities for those who are the victims of oppressive ideologies. Facilitation of critical reflection with those located in contexts of disadvantage remains crucial to the process.

The 'critical tools' required by disadvantaged ordinary real-readers, at this point, are quite different to the critical tools formulated by biblical scholarship. The assumption by biblical scholars that this robs disadvantaged ordinary real-readers of an ability to read critically should not be automatically concluded. The language used by the academies to describe some readers as 'ordinary' and themselves as 'critical' betrays an ideological commitment.[761] As noted above, ordinary readers *do* have the resources to read texts critically, even though they do not have access to the set of resources that constitute the critical tools of biblical scholars.[762] Considerable discussion takes place in both Biblical Hermeneutics of

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760 See discussion Ibid., pp. 334ff.

761 Hinga, p. 284.; Hinga previously suggests ;'The recognition by academic scholars that ultimately they themselves are "ordinary' (differing from others only in so far as they have different but not necessarily better resources for reading) will go a long way in eliminating the problem of elitism and the hubris implicit [in] . . . scholars who may, at times, not be able to resist to speak for the "Other"'.; p. 283. Cp Fowler's discussion of the different roles imposed on the pre-critical reader and the critical reader in Thiselton, New Horizons, pp. 315-316.

762 West, 'An Introduction: How We Have Come To "Read With"', p.7; also 'Reading the Bible Differently', he concludes: 'Our research has shown that while poor and marginalised ordinary readers do have critical resources for interpreting their texts and contexts, they do

Liberation[763] and West's article, 'Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourse of the Dominated',[764] analysing to what extent dominant ideologies (and theologies) shape the readings of disadvantaged real-readers.[765]

However, as Hinga notes, a process of reading *with* and listening *to* disadvantaged ordinary real-readers recognises that they have not entirely lost their voice or ability to read under the weight of some all pervading ideological domination: 'The discovery that "ordinary readers" are in effect "critical" readers in their contexts of oppression and they will critically respond to oppression is an important stance for an "academic" reader who wishes to participate in a genuine reading with the oppressed.'[766] It can further be argued that ordinary real-readers' readings from their socially embodied, concrete, lived human experience of disadvantage, rather than a set of abstract scientific critical tools, have an enhanced capacity and ability to read the biblical text in their context and provide a more penetrating analysis of how the meaning of the biblical text, especially any liberative meaning which has the capacity to act as a critique of dominating ideologies creating oppression, is appropriated in their context.[767]

On several occasions, women reading in Woolloomooloo exposed a commitment within the ecclesial space to the ideology of patriarchy as distorting the meaning of the text. Women reading in these groups recognised on occasions how they have

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not have the historical, sociological, literary, or symbolic tools to be critical of the biblical text in the same way as biblical scholars', p. 32.

763 West, Biblical Hermeneutics, pp. 200 - 215.

764 West, 'Reading the Bible Differently', pp. 29 - 31.

765 Briggs also notes the difficulties inherent with the category of 'experience': However the experiences which coalesce in the interstices of race, gender, class and sexuality are slippery indeed. . . it begs the question whether "experience" is an unhelpful thick description for what persons in a marginalised group have in common. Their common relationship to the exercises of social power which affect them as a group, even when these impose social disciplines upon them, may not have an even or identical effect on the subjective experiences of persons within the group. One also runs into the moral as well as intellectual problem in that the construction of representative experiences tends towards a unitary view of these which make it harder to see and take seriously the oppressions which operate within the group.', p18.

766 Hinga, p. 281.

767 As Keegan suggests: 'Those in power, whether political, economic, scholarly or religious, tend to justify their power by appealing to objective analyses that support the structured world they dominate. Postmodernsim recognises the need to deliver the interpreter from the repression of tradition al power and allow the voice of the disposed to be heard.', in 'Biblical Criticism and the Challenge of Postmodernism', p.1.

internalised the opinions of those who have sought to marginalise them in the ecclesial space, yet recognised how their own readings of the text opened up new and liberating self-awareness. Patriarchal distortion of the text became apparent in a number of places, for example in their reading of the resurrection stories, the woman in Simon's house, the women travelling with Jesus, and the general way in which the male characteristics of Jesus have been portrayed.[768]

After reading Luke 9: 43 - 52 with a focus on how the male disciples of Jesus are portrayed in the stories, Margaret Martinez, reading these stories for the first time, reflected on how her previous experience of the church and its teaching stood in stark contrast to what she read in the text:

> . . . I'm not up on the bible readings, but they were always portrayed as clean cut young men! Not greedy vain self-centred boys! [laughter]. Really they are normally portrayed as apostles in stained glass windows. I had no idea they got up to all this kind of stuff. Whenever I have looked at the windows in the convent school or the church, and I've been in a few, they are always right up there! I'm always looking up to them and they all have the most saintly looks on their faces, and even with haloes. If I told these stories to my daughter Danielle, without telling her anything else, I reckon she would think they were very bad men, not the apostles. They are meant to be the pick of the crop - well not any more![769]

Readers in the Glebe group repeatedly identified the ideology of economic rationalism and consumer capitalism as contrary to what they appropriated as meaning in Jesus' teaching.[770] Likewise, readers in the Redfern group identified the nexus between the dominant ideologies of consumer capitalism and the church in their reading of the temptations in Luke 4: 1 - 13.

> Lots of stuff in society tells us what the agenda is - from clothes to cars. You will be like this if you really are who you say you are. That's what marketing and advertising does. It creates an image and sets the

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768 A contemporary temptation Christian women face (a comment made in discussion of the temptations of Jesus in the Redfern Group) was identified by one woman as follows: 'You have the example of churches who won't recognise women in ministry. Because that's being destructive to the women who believe that they're called by God which then puts God to the test because its saying their sense of call isn't truly of God.', in Volume Two, pp. 111.

769 Ibid., p. 215.

770 Ibid., p. 2, 47ff, 71ff.

agenda. If we are who we say we are we will do this or that - if you want to be a managing director you will look like this. (RF) . . .

Can we put the church in place of the devil because it occurs to me that sometimes the church sets the agenda about if you say you are a Christian then you'll go off and fight in the Vietnam war or we'll test out who you are by the way you perform - probably even more threatening than the media doing it because of the power of the church, especially the hierarchical structure of the Catholic church. This could be very oppressive and put people under great pressure. (DM)[771]

At other times Australian myths resembling ideological commitments were apparent. The acceptance by one male reader of God as 'harsh but fair', despite the fact that this depiction included the mutilation and slaughter of an opponent, was a mirror image of current male mythology, especially in the world of business.[772] The ideology of 'the national interest' overwhelmingly influenced the reading by military chaplains on a number of occasions, as we have already noted.[773]

For readings from any source the question recurs: how can ideological commitments be foregrounded and evaluated in light of biblical truth? The role of consciousness-raising and dialogue are crucial - issues to which we will return below.

Truth - a good idea or a liberating effect?

This research raises a number of questions regarding truth. If the text speaks with a number of voices, which voice is the true one? If worlds are socially constructed, is truth socially constructed? If readers are all socially embodied readers reading a socially embodied text, is truth socially embodied? Is there some kind of trans-contextual truth or is truth context-specific?

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771 Ibid., p. 111.
772 Ibid., pp. 165.
773 Ibid., pp. 83, 107ff.

To attempt to answer to these questions would divert us from our main task. Some exploratory remarks, however, appear unavoidable.

Postmodern theorising has led to the recognition of a plurality of truth claims, which in turn has led to two further essential recognitions, namely that 'truth is made rather than found' and that language has a crucial role in this process.[774]

If the socially constructed nature of truth is credible - and one would have to concede that even with a 'transcendent' God this has to be the case - the history of truth claims made by both the academic and ecclesial spaces reveals that on numerous occasions the 'truth of God' has been claimed by competing and opposing forces.[775] Dogmatic assertions and the holding to 'good ideas' generally abstracted from 'lived experience' have been used ideologically to enslave people, and to maintain the power of the church and its control over human affairs in the name of truth.

With a plurality of truth claims, it cannot be said that one truth claim is as good as another. This is because we can identify the effects of truth claims in history, and what these truth claims have done in terms of 'lived experience'. The truth claim to 'life and life in all its fullness' of Western democratic consumer capitalism, established on the text of the Judeo-Christian work ethic, is a lie in the concrete experience of millions of people living in poverty and starvation.

In *behind* the text approaches to reading, the validity or truth of varying readings of a text is adjudicated by the coherence between the given reading and the historical reconstruction of the background of the text. With *in* the text approaches, the validity of varying readings is adjudicated with reference to the evidence provided by the text itself. *In front of* the text readings, however, provide a different

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774 Walter Truett Anderson, (Ed.), The Truth About truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), pp. 8 -9.

775 'In short, this is because over its interpretive life a text can be pressed into the service of so many varied and potentially conflicting ideologies . . .' so Stephen Fowl, 'Texts Don't Have Ideologies', Biblical Interpretation, 3.1, 1995, p. 18.

focus for the question 'what is truth?' The validity of a truth claim can be adjudicated by the coherence between the reading and the effect it has upon the 'lived experience' of the readers.[776]

Such a suggestion relates to emerging understandings of the role of language in the construction of social reality. Nancey Murphy reveals the inadequacy of both referential and expressivist theories of language, a possibility she credits to the work of Wittgenstein.

After a consideration of Austin's speech-act theory of language, and incorporating Stanley Fish's suggestion that neither linguistic conventions, referent nor intention is sufficient to establish meaning, requiring that social conventions must also be included in understanding texts, Murphy suggests a parallel claim could be made regarding biblical interpretation: 'neither word studies, nor form and genre criticism, nor historical criticism alone will enable readers to get to the point of a scriptural passage . . . Rather, all of these dimensions must come together in answering the question, what is the text *doing*?'[777] In the same sense it appears plausible to validate truth claims by asking what the truth claim is *doing*. What effect does it have on lived experience?

The claim that the text speaks with different voices, or that different socially embodied epistemologies attune readers to a particular voice, is not essentially different to the recognition that all readers reading the biblical story generally do so with a 'canon within the canon'. This inevitably requires a choice. It is apparent from the readings in the Gospel of Luke conducted as part of this research that the interpretive centre of their reading was the story of Jesus. This also reflects the author's interpretive centre for this discussion of truth. This Christological centring

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776 So West suggests '. . . what we need to do is to accept "a practical and communal knowledge, which tests the truth of a position [or reading] by asking whether and how it might apply to the practice - that is, the history - of the community', Biblical Hermeneutics, p.81.

777 Ibid., p.126 (italics Murphy's).

was evident in the readings on a number of occasions, specifically in identifying what effect the story being read had for people's lives.

Central to this was the Christological affirmation of lived human experience in a holistic sense. This lived human experience was understood to be enfleshed as well as spiritual, socially embodied with the potential for 'spiritual' experience. The measure of truth was identified in terms of the effect meaning had for living and what kind of effect this was. So Luke 6: 6 - 11:

What is it about?

It's about breaking the law, because the law is not just or in God's will. (S)

I think it's taking the letter of the law rather then the spirit in which it is said. So it's like the law is to keep the Sabbath holy and they want to keep that in a legalistic way, that keeps them bound. But Jesus is saying 'no' it's about actually freeing people - its about liberty. But they wanted to keep Jesus to the exact letter of the law - their own legalisms, and Jesus is redefining what that means. (Sue)

So how does Jesus redefine what it means? What's Jesus 'rule'?

He makes the comparison between good or harm and life or destroying it. We have the choice and whether or not it is on the Sabbath, what are we going to choose? Whatever empowers or frees people, or gives them life is important, not keeping people bound or destroyed. (T)

What does it mean for us today?

Well still there will be situations when it will appear that you might be doing something wrong in some people's eyes if you follow Jesus' directions - you might be criticised by people for doing it. (S)

It's like the drunk guy who walked in off the street last Sunday and asked for prayer for a friend who had died. If we had been any other church we would have had a deacon usher him out, but we stopped and had a prayer and included him, and then he sat down and stayed for the rest of the service. So it's just like that. (Sue)

What is the reason, whether it's society's law or the church's law, what is the reason that Jesus says we can break the law?

Because you save life instead if destroying it. (T)

People's lives are more important than the law of the Sabbath. (M)

It's just like those people who have complained about our work with sex workers and so they say it's wrong but that is not what Jesus is saying at all. (Mary)

No he says the complete opposite. (M)[778]

For sophisticated discussions of the truth about truth, such naivety may be readily dismissed. Truth in this case is not abstracted from socially embodied human experience nor from practice. It is something that *'gives'* life to another. The true meaning of what Jesus had said in the story was measured in the accompanying actions of Jesus that gave life to another. Theological formulations that require no 'performance' on the part of the religious community must approach religious belief through the lens of dualism or disembodied reality. That is, matters metaphysical, suprahistorical or spiritual can be established as 'true' on the basis of ontological or epistemological propositions that require no coherence or affirmation within the experience of human existence. However the credibility of the truth statement of Jesus in the Lukan passage under consideration was appropriated to the extent that it cohered to the performance of the one who made it. The truth is identified in the 'rule' of Jesus, that not only states, but illustrates in practice, that 'whatever empowers or frees people, or gives them life is important, not keeping people bound or destroyed'. The test for any truth claim is the extent to which a truth claim in practice performs life giving and liberating behaviour.

In the words of Charles Elliot:

> . . . It has always been a puzzle to theologians to know how you test for truth any proposition you want to make about God. The fundamentalist Protestants still say 'It's fine. The Bible will tell you whether it is true or not' . . . The sophisticated liberal theologian will say 'Test it against the tradition, against the mind of the church, against other propositions and see if it is coherent with those'. . . the liberation theologians will say very simply ' the test for truth is the effect it has on people's lives. Is this proposition . . . actually liberating people or enslaving them?' [779]

The particular problem with this concept of the nature of truth is that the effect of 'liberation' will be a different lived experience for people in different socially

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778 Volume Two, pp. 208 - 209.

779 Charles Elliot quoted in Rowland & Corner, Liberating Exegesis, p.42.

embodied contexts. For those who are oppressors, this will undoubtedly be so. Repentance from oppressive ways of behaving and positions of domination will be required. Such repentance, in Christological terms, cannot however be uniformly considered as unliberating.

This particular identification of truth as a liberating potentiality for lived experience also has the potential to liberate the biblical text itself from the hermeneutics of the academic and ecclesial spaces, when hermeneutics have been used by these spaces to avoid facing up to the grave and urgent questions of our contemporary reality, and when they have incorporated the socio-political values of the powerful in order to justify the status quo. It can also act as a tool of suspicion exposing readings that do not translate into liberating action for all humanity. [780]

With this test for truth in mind, the readings in Volume Two and analysis in light of this test for truth assist in answering the question - why do people read the Bible the way they do? These readings further support the suggestion that how people interpret and read the biblical texts may well tell us 'even more about them than about the texts themselves.'[781] Further these readings allow for analysis to take place regarding an understanding of the *effect* of a text in a particular context, and the way in which that context conditions interpretation.

Safeguards Against Reading Anarchy

If we recognise that the reader has an active role in giving meaning to texts, and that the reader is shaped and informed by the lived human experiences within her/his socially embodied context, and that this social embodiment has an active role in shaping and informing the questions, interests and interpretive strategies

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780 'The hermeneutics of the Kingdom of God consists in making this world a better place. Only in this way will I be able to discover what the Kingdom of God means.' So Edward Schillebeeckx, Jesus : An Experiment in Christology (London: Collins, 1979), p. 745

781 Thiselton identifies this as the fourth way in which textual readings interpret the self, concluding that 'reception theory, often associated with H.R. Jauss, offers a major resource for hermeneutics in this respect'; in Interpreting God, pp. 65 - 66.

that are brought to the text, how do we guard against self-serving or parochial readings of the text? What safeguards exist against reading anarchy?

Left to their own devices, ordinary real-readers may produce fanciful self-serving readings. Left to their own devices, professional readers may produce abstract self-serving readings. As the transcripts in Volume Two reveal there were occasions when readers produced readings that were dislocated from the text, made assumptions about what was in the text or appropriated the text in a way which was fanciful. As the history of interpretation also reveals, professional readers have also produced a wide variety of esoteric, theory-laden readings of the biblical texts producing confusion rather than clarity.

How can scholarly voices act as a safeguard against flights of fancy by ordinary readers, and how can the voices of ordinary readers act as a safeguard against oppressive and dominating readings by scholarly readings? And how can potentially liberating readings by ordinary readers be incorporated into the hermeneutic conversation?

Some tentative suggestions follow.

Self and social analysis

Firstly, through self analysis and social analysis we must discover who we are. For ordinary readers, trained clergy and scholars, self-knowledge and self-understanding is too often assumed, as well as the assumption that we understand what the biblical text is saying to us. As John Goldingay suggests:

> The assumption that we understand is most threatening to understanding; suspicion of ourselves of the kind encouraged by the three "masters of suspicion," Marx, Neitzsche, and Freud, is indispensable to growth in understanding, for immediate consciousness is always likely to be false consciousness.[782]

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782 Goldingay, Models, p. 225.

As active readers of the biblical text, we must utilise a variety of tools of analysis in order to identify false consciousness. Psychological profiles, for example, the work of Myers-Brigg,[783] can be useful. Self-analysis in terms of group interaction utilising the work of Kennard, Roberts and White[784] is also useful for foregrounding interpretive interests.

The tools of social analysis[785] are essential for the discovery of who we are in our contemporary social worlds, including our respective social locations in order to identify how they shape and inform our interpretive interests. To a degree this analysis will guard against claims to objective value-free knowledge, and make us open to those who are 'other', and guard against readings that merely reflect our own agenda and interests.

Dialogue and openness

Secondly, we must commit ourselves to reading the Bible in community with others, particularly with those from contemporary contexts different to our own. Here we recognise the *crucial* and *essential* role of dialogue and being *open* to *others*.

> I inevitably view the world from the vantage point where I stand, which fixes a horizon for me, determines what I can see, and influences how well I see it. If I can look at it from someone else's vantage point, then, first, I have the opportunity to understand this other person. Then, if I am open to the possibility that this other perspective may open out onto reality itself, that broader horizon of which both it and my perspective are but part, my horizon is extended. I see reality more fully. The process of interpretation involves a merging of horizons. A dialogue takes place between Scripture and contemporary perspectives.[786]

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783 For example Isabel Briggs Myers, The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1962).

784 Kennard, Roberts & White, A Workbook.

785 See for example Joe Holland & Peter Henriot, Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983).

786 Goldingay, Models, p. 225.

Those who inhabit the ordinary/indigenous hermeneutic space need those who inhabit the academic and ecclesial spaces. But those in the academic and ecclesial spaces also need those in the ordinary/indigenous space. It is a mutual need, as in each hermeneutic space dialogue and being open to others guards against totalising exegetical discourse. Commenting on the distinction Robert Fowler makes between the ordinary reader who is mastered by the text and the critical reader who is able to distance her/himself from the text, Thiselton notes Fowler's conclusion that 'readerly passion' and 'critical distance' are *both* required for a satisfactory reading to be achieved.[787]

Gadamer recognises dialogue as 'a process in which truth arises in the to-and-fro of questions and of conversation'.[788] The six essential components of dialogue identified by Gadamer relate particularly to dialogue between text and interpreter, but can extend beyond this to dialogue between socially embodied real-readers of the text. Certain principles will necessarily apply, particularly so in terms of what Gadamer calls 'goodwill', a goodwill that precludes 'dogmatism' and 'subjectivism'. Dialogue exists only where there is a real respect for the 'otherness' of the other.[789]

Steven Long reflecting on his particular context of South Africa, points to what he claims is an important aspect of dialogue that Gadamer failed to see. Dialogue can be and is usually hindered or even prevented when the participants in the conversation are situated unequally in the structures of their society.[790] Essential to the process of dialogue therefore, is the foregrounding of power relationships. As West asserts:

> Provided the unequal power relations between ordinary and trained readers are acknowledged and foregrounded, provided the trained reader is willing to learn "from below", and provided the poor and marginalised continue to empower and be empowered, there is hope

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787 Thiselton, New Horizons, pp. 315 - 316. The question of how this might be achieved in practice is not addressed by Thiselton.

788 Ibid., p. 321.

789 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd Ed., (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p.306.

790 Long, 'A Real Reader Reading Revelation', p.82.

> for something transformative to emerge from the interface between trained and ordinary readers of the Bible.[791]

Insights from adult education assist in identifying the nature of 'dialogue' that is open and mutually engaging. Paula Allman[792] compares dialogue with discussion, identifying discussion, although widely used in a variety of forms of adult education, as an essentially uncreative form of communication within a group. Discussion, she suggests, is little more than a sharing of monologues, monologues composed of closed pre-existing ideas which participants offer to the group. Dialogue, on the other hand, is a process in which participants are credited with the skills of interpretation and undertake a critical analysis of their own and others' understanding of reality. This moves beyond a process where a facilitator asks each group member in turn to 'say their bit', maintaining monologue. In dialogue the facilitator enters into conversation with each member of the group, facilitating each member of the group to do likewise:

> . . . dialogue is intended to be a way of relating, one to another, the effect of which is radical because it produces the development of trust, care, collaboration and commitment amongst the participants rather than competition and individualism.[793]

Such an approach also brings into focus the crucial role and need for those who are in a position to facilitate dialogue between professional readers and ordinary real-readers, especially those who are disadvantaged. As West has already made clear, the role of the facilitator in reading the Bible *with* disadvantaged ordinary real-readers is precisely that - *with*. Neither a naive acceptance of the interpretations of the biblical text by ordinary real-readers, nor a reading *to* them, as if they have no way to read for themselves, is appropriate. Reading with is an enabling process, foregrounding the difference of power between the facilitator and the readers, in order to arrive at open dialogue.[794]

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791 West, 'Difference and Dialogue', p.155.

792 Paula Allman's work in Nottingham is discussed in Michael Newman, Defining the Enemy: Adult Education in Social Action (Sydney: Stewart Victor Publishing, 1994), pp. 82 - 84.

793 Ibid., p. 83.

794 West repeatedly makes it clear that power relations cannot be obliterated or ignored. With others he identifies the creative and constructive potential of 'a genuinely dialectical

Facilitation of such reading with requires a commitment by trained readers of the biblical texts to 'incarnate' themselves amongst disadvantaged ordinary real-readers to establish both trust and openness. As West and Sinclair have noted, echoing the stance of liberation theologians, facilitators who engage in reading with disadvantaged ordinary real-readers must be committed to 'doing biblical studies with and from the perspectives of the poor and oppressed'.[795] At this point both West and Sinclair, and other authors in the Semeia 73 volume, find Antonio Gramsci's conception of an 'organic intellectual' most relevant. Whatever term in theory may apply to this role, in practice it will be one of commitment and grounding within communities of disadvantaged people, wherever they may be found, in order to gain trust and earn the right to read with them, and engage the biblical texts from the realities of their struggles.[796]

Dialogue and our ancestors in faith[797]

Finally in order to safeguard the reading process from merely reflecting contemporary interests and concerns we also need to commit ourselves to reading the Bible in dialogue with our ancestors in faith. The history surrounding the text, and the history of interpretation remains an essential dialogue partner in the process of biblical interpretation, and provides us with an 'other' view of the biblical text. This dialogue will need to be both open and critical, attuned to the commitments of our ancestors where these can be adequately identified, and rejected where the voices of our ancestors in the faith speak oppressively. This dialogue will also recognise, as we have above, that the Bible does not come to us

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interaction between the vigilantly foregrounded subject positions' which enables the possibility of moving beyond 'speaking for' and 'listening to' towards a place where difference enables, in 'Reading the Bible Differently', p.25.

795 Ibid., p.28; See also Sinclair, p. 288; also Rowland, '"Open Thy Mouth For The Dumb"', p. 242, ftnt. 26.

796 Cp. Laurie Green's idea of a 'people's theologian' in Let's Do Theology. (London: Mowbray, 1990).

797 The phrase 'ancestors in the faith' I credit to Philip Esler. I first heard this term in a seminar Esler gave in Oxford in February 1997 in Oxford at Queens College.

as a neutral book, but one interpreted and reinterpreted by many who have gone before us.

The view however, that critical historical analysis is the only approach, rather than one of a number of approaches, requires modification. As Watson has pointed out, 'To exclude historical considerations entirely would result in a seriously deficient theology'.[798] One cannot overlook that the original texts, originally conveyed meaning to our, by and large, 'ordinary' ancestors in the faith, the people who first discovered what it meant to be a Follower of Christ. While this experience may be very different from our contemporary experience, it would be closed minded, foolish and arrogant to suggest that their experience does not matter and that somehow it is locked forever in a past we cannot adequately penetrate. Simply put, dialogue with our ancestors in faith is a 'question of respect, solidarity and prudence.'[799]

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798 Watson suggests, 'There is no reason in principle why diachronic and synchronic perspectives should not complement rather than contradict each other, and in certain respects it is theologically important that they should do so. To exclude historical considerations entirely would result in a seriously deficient theology'; in Church, Text and World, pp. 46-47.

799 Philip Esler, private correspondence, April 1997.

Conclusion

We have identified how postmodern theorising has confirmed the reader as an active agent in the process of the interpretation of texts, and how sociology of knowledge approaches have identified both the author *and* the reader of texts as socially embodied within a context. We have also explored how contemporary human experience has shaped and informed the way in which ordinary real-readers have read the Gospel of Luke, and identified the value these readings have for the process of ongoing biblical interpretation. A number of important issues have been identified for the contemporary hermeneutic task, including the usefulness of readings of biblical texts that arise out of 'different' and 'other' contexts, and the need for ongoing self and social analysis.

For the purpose of this study the reading groups concluded in 1996. However the reading process utilised in this study has continued. The process has been used intentionally with women sex-workers by women working in the Women's Space Project, and with homeless people by staff in the Long Term Accommodation Unit. People for whom the Bible is a mystery or assumed to be inaccessible are given the opportunity to read with others, more often than not for the first time, the biblical texts. The process has also been used to prepare homilies with church members who would usually never have a voice, by those on the preaching roster at Woolloomooloo and Glebe. While still emerging, the process has potential to allow a voice for the voiceless, not as a solo, but as a chorus of mutually empowered and empowering exegetical discourse in conversation and dialogue with readers from other contexts and other places of power. Such a possibility, despite the difficulties, should not be drowned by a 'counsel of despair',[800] but engaged actively as an authentic process for contemporary hermeneutics.

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800 So Forrester, 'Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Relativism', p. 124.

The process produced a number of other practical outcomes. 'As we have noted an Amnesty International group and a Fruit and Vegetable Co-operative for low income families have been established. Margaret Martinez is now the Aboriginal community worker in Woolloomooloo, and actively engaged in justice issues for Indigenous people, after many years of disempowerment and racial prejudice. The statement of beliefs or 'Urban Theology Distinctives', identified above as an example of a local theology, emerged in 1997, shaped and informed by the reading process itself. The meaning of the Lukan text for ordinary real-readers in this context required expression in practical rather than intellectual terms, the former giving expression to the 'truth' they found in the text.

The role of the author continues to be one that requires analysis, and the recognition that power is present in many equivalent roles. The need and a place for what others have described as an 'organic intellectual', or 'people's theologian', remains crucial amongst communities of ordinary real-readers, especially those located in marginalised and disadvantaged contexts. We all have power. The issue is how that power is used.

The transcripts in Volume Two reveal that reading the Bible produced a good deal of fanciful eisegesis by the ordinary readers. And it was also established that on a number of occasions professional readers of the text produced what might be also identified as fanciful eisegesis, and interpretations that served their own particular presuppositions and reflected their particular location in academy and /or church. The way in which context, including all aspects of one's culture, language, social and ecclesial location, shapes and informs the reading of biblical texts will continue to be a matter for serious investigation. No more apparent was this than in the interpretation of a minor aspect of Jesus' inaugural sermon in the synagogue in Luke 4. In verse 22, the reaction of the people in the synagogue to the words Jesus read from Isaiah in the Australian context was understood in light of the local cultural phenomenon as evidence of 'tall poppy syndrome'. The people just wanted to put Jesus, the young upstart, in his place! In other parts of the

world, professional readers alternatively identified the reaction of the people to Jesus as '*c'est incroyable! C'est le fils d'un charpentier, non?!*', or as 'familiarity breeds contempt'. The profound influence, implicitly or explicitly, our social embodiment has on our reception of the text will continue to be an integral realisation for contemporary hermeneutics, in both small as well as large issues in biblical interpretation.

In this light we need to ponder Margaret Martinez's concept of Jesus' preferential option for mothers. At first glance this appears a classic case of fanciful eisegesis, perhaps threatening and readily dismissed by those of us who are not mothers. But to a mother from a marginalised and racially oppressed group of people, who suffered the loss of a child, that given appropriate medical treatment for Indigenous people could have been avoided, and who continues to grieve this death, what criteria do we offer her to convince her that the story of Jesus in raising the widow's son at Nain, is *not* about a preferential option of Jesus for mothers? What does such a reading have to say to the patriarchal structures in the church and academies that have alternatively portrayed Jesus in this resurrection story as one with a preference for a display of power. Again we return to the question crucial for contemporary biblical interpretation: whose interests does a reading serve, and what is the effect on the lives of others this reading produces?

So the challenge remains for the task of biblical interpretation and contemporary hermeneutics, to identify and witness in a credible way to God's passion for life and to participate through the empowerment of others in the *missio dei* to liberate God's good and wonderful creation.

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Re-reading the Gospel of Luke Today:
From a
First Century Urban Writing Site
to a
Twentieth Century Urban Reading Site

Volume Two

Reader's Transcripts

ANDREW CURTIS

Volume Two of a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the Open University
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The following volume contains the transcripts of ordinary real-readers, reading the Gospel of Luke.

In each group, permission to tape the reading(s) and interpretation of the Gospel of Luke was granted. The taped reading sessions were then transcribed into this final form. Readers are identified in the transcripts by their initials or abbreviated name, with the exception of the military chaplains, who are identified by number, due to their desire to remain anonymous.

The transcripts contain a record of spoken language. They are ranscripts of oral discourse. Particiapnts had acquired varying degrees of literacy and some did not speak English as their first language. This is evident in the style of the transcripts.

Details of the reading process are outlined in Volume One, Chapter Two of this thesis. The standard questions, in order to initiate discussion and promote an understanding of the text being considered, with minor variations, were 'who are the characters?', 'what is the setting?' and 'what is the plot?', and 'what does it mean for you today?' (or a variation of this same question). The transcripts contain a summary of group conclusions to the first three recurrent questions, with the exception that when discussion of the plot was central to the discussion of the fourth question, it was useful to transcribe the entire conversation. The bulk of the transcripts contain discussion by the group in response to the fourth question concerning contemporary meaning.

Where a Lukan text is identified at the commencement of, or during a transcript of a group reading, it is to be understood that the text was *always* read in full *audibly* by the group members.

When the transcript shows . . . it indicates the discussion was rapid and involved more than one participant. Significant non-verbal aspects of the reading are noted in brackets, for example [General laughter]. The facilitator's interventions are always italicised.

For the sake of space I have generally summarised comments or discussion that does not relate directly to the passage being considered.

Various translations of the Gospel of Luke used by group participants are abbreviated as follows:

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Revised Standard Version (RSV).

Good News Bible (GNB).

Jerusalem Bible (JB).

King James Version (KJV).

New International Version (NIV).

GLEBE GROUP ONE

Readers: Bruce McKenzie (B); Ray Brown (R); Oenwen Woods (G);
Leigh Webster (S).

2/6/95

Luke 4.

Who are the main characters, what is the setting and how would you summarise the plot?

Main Characters: Jesus; the sick; the devil; the teachers; people in the synagogue.
Setting: The desert; synagogue; with a multitude of people.
Plot: Maybe it is spiritual birth? (G) . . . or fulfilling prophecy? (B) . . . or an indication of his next three years where he was a prophet but found extensive opposition. (R)

What is the main point of the first story in verses 1-13?

Emphasis on Jesus as a man - you know human. The devil has a go at Jesus because of his humanity. It is about Jesus as a human. (S)

Why doesn't the story mention drinking? Jesus never drank anything for forty days but we know today he would be dehydrated and die. (R)

Maybe he fasted to attune himself to where he was. (B)

Maybe the toxins made him hallucinate? (G)

So lets read the story as we have it in front of us - what is Jesus tempted with in verse 3 ?

It's hitting a person when they are at their lowest ebb or weakest point. I'll do this for you if you follow me and do as I say. (G)

It's appealing to Jesus's ego - if you are who you say you are prove it - or if you are who you say you are and I've got you at your lowest ebb, prove to me you are not a joke. (S)

Who on this housing estate could you identify as being at their lowest ebb?

Just take a look at us waiting outside the bank on pension day - not enough money to buy food - it happens right here in Glebe. (S)

Have you seen the kids looking in the rubbish or trying to steal food - neglected children right here in Glebe. (G)

I also think of people at their lowest ebb like the ones in Rwanda - they are killing each other over food. (B)

That's the temptation part. You know to kill or steal or stand over someone or rob a shop - that's the real temptation. (R)

Get it any way you can - you know the temptation of a quick easy buck - do this fiddle on the side - even do a Robin Hood. (G)

You find your mind going along the most alarming way when you see the Packers and Murdochs, that's when you get a Robin Hood syndrome. (S)

And when you think like that the church tells you don't worry about the short term, think about the long term and look for more spiritual values. Well when your really hungry you just don't think like that! (R)

But prayer can help. I heard of a woman who was on a Lenten fast and she prayed when she felt faint and made it through - but it takes two parts though. (S)

What about the next temptation?

Its about riches and power - authority as the Devil says - although why he says he has authority I don't know. (B)

Its about offering all Jesus needs but only to suck him in. That's just like drug pushers on the Estate. You know they offer you a little sample, have a taste, now have some more, now you're in my debt, now you do anything I say and now you'll be devoted to me all the more. (G)

I reckon Jesus was being tempted by material things. He says 'serve God only', but here in the western world we all have possessions but they possess us. We worship God with our voices, but we do the same kind of talk when we get a car or a microwave or technology. We all fall down here even when we worship something we could easily do without. It relates back to the bread alone bit. (R)

What about the temptation in verses 9 and following?

That's about taking stupid risks like putting your last five dollars on a horse. (G)

Or if you're terminally ill, but don't do anything about it, like not take your pills and just sit there and pray. (B)

Yes, if you don't take your pills or have unsafe sex - people are tempted to take unsafe risks. (S)

God says be sensible, use your common sense. So I'm a schizophrenic and understand my medication to be a gift from God so when Charismatic churches say 'stop taking your medication' and 'trust in God' I think they are wrong and tempting me like the devil did to take a stupid risk and get off my medication. Sure I need to trust God but I need to take the medication which I see is a gift from God. I reckon it's putting God to the test to go off my medication. (R)

Anybody want to sum up so far as we have run out of time?

Well Jesus says no to all three temptations so he is a good man. (S)

He is humble and obedient to God. (G)

Jesus acts single mindedly. (R)

Each temptation can make you waver a bit - society makes you want things you can't have - like winning a house in Hawaii but then you got to think will it really fulfil all my needs, so everything Jesus did was an example to us! (S)

9/6/95

Luke 4: 14-30

Characters : Jesus, the congregation.
Setting : Galilee, Nazareth, Synagogue.
Plot: People liked some of the things Jesus said but not others - or maybe its about prophets not being accepted in their own towns? (B)

What do we think the Scripture that Jesus found means?

The good news is life eternal so its spiritual good news - people can be poor but rich in spirit- the poverty bit is about spiritual things. (R)

I don't agree. Jesus says its me and its here and now these things will happen - not some time else. Jesus is confronting them and expects to be rebuked! because he's the carpenter's son - he cannot be the one in the scroll! That's what it says. (S)

They don't think he is good enough. (G)

I think the enemies are goading in the background, saying he's a prophet and is not accepted, so Jesus is goading them to contradict him. They wouldn't want to admit they won't accept their own. (S)

It's the same if you go overseas as a missionary. You're famous but if you try that in your own community see what happens. (G)

Why do we read this spiritually?

Well Jesus didn't actually free prisoners did he - I mean it wasn't meant to be taken literally. You can't read one verse on its own like good news to the poor means poverty but the next line doesn't mean prisoners. (R)

So it must mean prisoners of sin and guilt. (B)

What is the year of the Lord's favour? (S)

The year that Jesus begins his preaching. (G)

[General agreement]

But who are the poor today? We have relative poverty but here everyone gets a benefit while in other countries they get nothing- that's real poverty, but spiritual poverty is worse than real poverty. (R)

Spiritual poverty is when you live locked into your own world and you never think to help anyone else. That's real poverty and spiritual poverty as well. (S)

If you have a free and rich spirituality you no longer have poverty. (R)

Here you can always get help. There is always an organisation you can go to if you're really poor. (S)

Maybe it really means both spiritual and real poverty. But I guess what I' m saying is that if good news to the poor is the prosperity gospel then I don't want anything of it. (R)

But I think there will always be poverty - there will always be the poor. (G)

Is that a good thing?

Well no its not - but this offers hope. (G)

Do we take this idea of poverty or blindness literally - I mean I suppose Jesus did heal people who were blind so it was a real blindness - not a spiritual one? (B)

To see God's will is recovery of sight. Like when you see a person in pain and you stop to help them you see what God wants you to see. (G)

I'm wondering why Naaman the Syrian was the only one cured? (B)

It's because he was a non-Jew - they were very racist. They didn't think he should be cured and its the same today - racism all over. (G)

And what about the widow? What kind of place did women have in the society? Maybe that's why the people got so angry? (S)

Be the same today - imagine what would happen if a person from Kings Cross went to church at St. Ives[1], or someone smelling of alcohol and cigarettes? (G)

Mass jealously it seems to me is what the congregation were on about, that is what racism is, mass jealousy. (B)

And its not just race. Just imagine if the nearest hospital was a public hospital and two people were involved in an accident and one was rich and the other poor. Who would want and who would be treated first? The rich of course! (G)

So he's [Jesus] having a shot at people who think they are too good to assist people in need. God wants this as the story says. You know what people do even if they think a person has cancer, let alone someone with HIV. (G)

They don't want to know you if you're different. (S)

It really says don't be a snob (G) . . . show tolerance (S) . . . be patient with people (G) . . . live by example. (G)

16/6/95

The group commenced its discussion with comment on the newly formed committee in Glebe for the feeding of children under 12 years old roaming the streets of Glebe. A soup kitchen is to be set up on Mondays and Fridays. About 30 kids are expected between the ages of 2 -12, mainly from Aboriginal families. This kitchen was called the Kid's Canteen.

I then explained that Ray had decided not to continue in the group. Shirley remarked that he'd left because she had told him there were really poor people in Glebe, and that this didn't fit with his ideas about poverty only being overseas.

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1 St. Ives is a north-shore Sydney suburb . In terms of social location it would be identified as 'upper middle-class'.

This she explained had something to do with his idea of spirituality and how being poor was closer to being Christian.

Luke 4 : 31-44

Characters : Jesus, Simon's mother in law; Man with a demon; Demon; Congregation.
Settings: Synagogue; Simon's house; Deserted place.
Plot: Jesus heals both sick and demon possessed people. Demons know who Jesus is but the people don't. (B)

I wonder if they saw a demon? (G) . . . the demons are identified with Satan or evil. (S).

What are the contemporary demons you confront today?

Alcohol (G) . . . drugs and greed (S) . . . hatred in its many forms and prejudices that people have (G) . . . jealously and envy (B) . . . selfishness, loneliness(G) . . . fear. (S)

What is the biggest demon in Glebe?

Prejudice. (G)

No it's apathy, a feeling of senselessness in being who we are. (S)

What is the biggest demon outside of Glebe in the wider world?

Greed and a consumer society (S) . . . fear of different things wherever we are (G) . . . poverty of any kind whether spirit or actual. (B)

I think we always wrestle with our own private demons as well as the ones out there - you know - like how we have to be as good as the people around us and want to one better. (S)

I think a major demon is how young people have an obsession with their bodies and how they look - all based on what they see on TV or in magazines (G) . . . yes they're gym junkies. (S)

Other people are people who are selfish. You know some people have been so long on their own that they forget to think about what others around them might need or they even forget to think about others. (S)

So what do we think the passage might mean?

Well Jesus doesn't ignore the demons - he confronts them and takes them on - that's what the will of God is. (G)

Doing nothing is as bad as doing something wrong about the demons around us. (G)

You have to respond. Action is what is needed. (B)

You might see the demons sometimes but you can't do it on your own - so you need to do it in a group. (S)

I saw some people who looked very hungry when I did my shopping but I was too scared to try to talk to them on my own but if I had been with a group I would have? (G)

So you need to respond with a community of people behind you ?

Both ways. (G/S)

Now in the story of Simon's mother in law what happens?

Jesus doesn't think the fever would go by itself (B) . . . no way he told the fever, told it to bugger off. (S)

It's a great word rebuke - its like chastise - its a strong word and I like it. (G)

Why does Jesus do this?

Because he was asked. Simon's a friend and he wants to help a friend so we need to do our friends a favour. (B)

Because Jesus was hungry and he wanted his dinner so he healed her and she got up and waited on him (with great laughter), the feminists would love that! (S)

But he did have compassion. (G)

I think it's because that Jesus simply doesn't want people to be ill. I see no merit in suffering and death like it was suggested last night at the bible study - it was about all the things that prayer could not do. (S)

I couldn't sleep after it. (G)

Well I can't be good like people who see great things in suffering. I know what suffering is like and it doesn't do anything for me. (S)

Jesus doesn't want people to suffer, that's why he rebukes the fever - he wants people to be all right. (G)

I think we underestimate the power of the devil in all these things. We need to pray about illness and not give up. And I think that's the way God wants it!! (B)

It's so strong about the illness because Jesus rebukes the demons the same way so illness is just as bad you see - it's not what Jesus wants for people. (G)

I wonder why they didn't allow him to speak? (B)

I think it's because the demons would be like false prophets - they can't speak and shouldn't speak on Jesus' behalf. Jesus doesn't want them to speak for him! (G)

It's like the demons saying to Jesus we're on your side (S) . . . but no you're not says Jesus. (G)

It's like the television evangelists who want to say they can identify Jesus but all they want is people's money - even a bit like the church itself! Or the Toronto Blessing. (B)

It's like contemporary demons that claim to be what God wants isn't it? (G)

Yes and Jesus is saying don't talk on my behalf I don't need you to do it for me as you will only confuse other people. (B)

Now in verse 42 what happens?

Jesus wants to be alone - which is really very human, even though people wanted him he needed to be alone to get his strength back. (S)

Get away and meditate. (B)

This is the spiritual side to things - Jesus is very active but then needs time out to be with God (G) . . . otherwise you're no good to anybody. (S)

I'm still thinking about that bible study last night you know. We went off on such a tangent, all about God punishing Moses and how he slugged his guts out for 40 years and then didn't get to see the promised land - its offensive to me this idea of God. (G)

I think its all too spiritual for me to look at things that way - God loves us for who we are. This story today tells us that - and so we need to read the full story to get the full picture - its no good just looking at one bit of it! (S)

What about Paul who did all sorts of bad things to Christians before the Damascus road experience? He didn't get punished like Moses. People always say we should be more like Paul but I don't think so. We shouldn't assume God doesn't hear our prayers or God is selective. (G)

Maybe the idea of what God is doing changes from the story of Moses to Paul. (S)

Yes - maybe that's it. (B)

<u>23/6/95</u>

Luke 5

What is the main plot of the chapter?

Miracles of healing and provision (B) . . . anti-discrimination by mixing with outcasts (G) . . . call of disciples to follow and making up the gang of followers (B) . . . all of this must have been early in Jesus' ministry (S) . . . you will be catching people says Jesus - so its really about human beings (G) . . .you get the impression of a magnetising personality. (B)

And then there is the Pharisees and conflict. (S)

Simon had enough faith so he let the nets down (S) . . . faith rewarded (G) . . . faith to the test (B) . . . are they willing to listen to Jesus? (G)

See in verse 8 Peter was awed - I like that - he's a simple person. You know it's all too much for me says Peter - go away and do these miracles to some one who is worthy - you know just like an ordinary person not a great saint, and then Jesus says don't sell yourself short! You matter. (G)

Notice how they left everything - downed tools and followed Jesus (S) . . . so there must have been something about Jesus that attracted them - they didn't have the Bible then to tell this story they took it all in faith (G) . . . so they recognised something (B) . . . they must have known he wasn't some nutter off the street (G)

. . . so he must have had a charismatic type of approach like some politicians (B) . . . yet it's the same isn't it because the best charismatic leaders like JFK, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln all like Jesus get assassinated, even Victor Chang the same. (S).

There is not much of a place in this world for people who stand out for the right things! (G)

It's because like the Pharisees they see their authority challenged (B) . . . no-one wants to see their authority challenged. (G).

So what is the contemporary meaning of the text?

Well it reminds me what has happened to the idea for the feeding of the children here in Glebe. After the first big meeting there were only 4 people who were willing to sit down and work out the constitution. And it came about that each of the people independently thought that God wanted them to do it. Like Lyn on the committee who is blind had the minutes read to her and heard of kids going hungry so she turned to Sister Alicia to do something and then John heard something and told me so I went along and although its now down from the original 20, it's just like the calling of the disciples because while the others have dropped off those who remain hear the same message - don't give up or say its too hard - don't be afraid to do something good hear the call, leave everything and respond. That's God. (G)

In verses 12 and following what happens here ?

Well its the start of the miracles of Jesus with his disciples. (B)

Leprosy is a real disease - you can actually see it - not like demon possession. (G)

The leper didn't demand healing - he said if you want to you can heal me. (B)

Do we know if Jesus wanted to heal the leper?

Yes from what happens in chapter 4 verse 39. (S)

I do choose! says Jesus, so he's quite clear about it, he does want the person to be healed! So much so he touches the leper - nobody wanted to touch a leper but Jesus doesn't even baulk at it he goes right on and does it (G) . . . and you know the leper would have had very low self esteem so the healing and the touching would have made him feel worthy again. (S)

The leper was humble to some extent but he did go up to Jesus who really did want to heal him. (G)

I wonder why Jesus said not to tell anybody? Verse 14, probably didn't need the publicity! Maybe if the wrong message gets out, mobs appear. (B) . . . that would

make it a seven day a week thing - Jesus is human he'd never be left alone (G) . . . it's a very human picture of Jesus isn't it? (S) . . . yes not a superhuman entity that didn't need what we need (G) . . . so verse 16 makes sense and it says a lot for meditation and contemplation. (S)

So who has leprosy today??

Aids people (G) . . . people with hepatitis or TB. (B)

So Jesus wants to show us by this miracle that he didn't discriminate against them and neither should we! (G - with strong group consensus)

Is that what the church is doing?

No way its too elitist and middle class they don't react well to AIDS (S) . . . they're too homophobic(G) . . . they don't want to accept these people like Jesus did (S) . . . and they don't even try to learn about it and understand it (S) . . . there should be more education in the church! (G) . . . its the same with alcoholics, the church is a no go zone. Some people won't even touch a cup used by a street person - but health issues are important we shouldn't be foolish - some churches are trying to do some things (B) . . . yes but very little. (S)

People don't want to catch it but bigots especially don't want to catch it as they will then be the objects of that bigotry. (G)

The same goes with homosexuals as well - here in this miracle it's clear you have to accept everybody. (S)

All our sins are forgiven not just some (G) . . . and there is many rooms in the mansion so there is room for everybody in the Kingdom. (Bruce)

What is different today is that people with modern diseases are ostracised by the church - they might beg but they get no response. (G)

Notice it says the power of the Lord was with him. Was there times when it wasn't? (S)

Maybe that's when he needed to retreat and be recharged! (B)

Notice in this story the faith of the men it's terrific - they went right on in! Even with the Pharisees there the little people went right on in. The Pharisees say that nobody but Jesus can forgive sins - Jesus knows what they are thinking - he knows what's going on! (S)

So which is the easiest? Jesus shows them by doing both! It's words and actions the hidden things as well as the open things - it's both at the same time. (G)

Both the soul and the body were healed. (S)

Does verse 26 include the Pharisees?

Now we read of Levi who left everything and its just a simple call no fancy stuff just follow me (G) . . . Jesus knows what he wants - doesn't have to dress it up. (S)

What happens in the story?

Levi has a party (G) . . . and invites all the people that nobody wants to know. (S)

Where were the Pharisees? No talk of them, they must have been outside observing things (B) . . . they were the upper crust I think the religious yuppies (S) . . . the self-righteous - they're not sinners! (G)

Look at verse 32 - a basic statement of Jesus' ministry and a real smack in the mouth. (S)

Who are the Pharisees today?

Church leaders (S) . . . people who want to be religious and keep themselves apart from the world (B) . . . decent right thinking people (S) . . . church councils who get off on power trips booting out people they don't want (B) . . . they're the Pharisees today - the people who think they are above everybody else!! (G) . . . Backbiters (B) . . . not up front to your face they're devious and gossip (G) . . . the best gossip around is after the 11 o'clock service (B) Jesus calls them all hypocrites (B) . . . we should be here to heal those who need it most. (G)

GLEBE GROUP TWO

Readers: Gwen (G), Shirley (S), Colin (C), Bruce (B), Izzy (Izzy), Harvey (H).

24/5/96

The first reading group commenced with discussion about the Glebe and what major 'conversations' or symbols gave it distinctive character as an inner city suburb of Sydney. A summary of the discussion follows.

1. The diversity of people in Glebe and the change over the past 20 years are in the following ways:

* Gelebophiles being forced out by gentrification.
* 20 years ago it was a slum.
* Department of Housing now trying to move out drug dealers and Triads (criminal gangs based on ethnicity).
* Increase in the numbers of ethnics and indigenous people in the Glebe.
* Locals are fiercely protective of the Glebe.
* It's home.
* Once you're past Leichhardt you're in the bush.
* Lack of shopping facilities - no butchers, no supermarket, no delicatessen, quality of shops relate to the state of the market. On the Glebe estate, 'the "posh" end of town', the shops are much better quality- there's even a Doctor's surgery up the end of Glebe Point Road.
* What used to be called the slum end is now called the academic end.
* Children in poverty is still a major problem.
* The demise of the breakfast program called Kids Canteen because of interference by a church official was discussed.
* Segregation via boundaries was noted.
* The community spirit was also identified as one that was growing and developing.

The group agreed to reading chapter six of Luke. After my initial question about themes the group suggested that the main themes were:

The Sabbath Your bodily needs come first - rules come second (B) . . . Hunger comes before even the consecration of bread. (G)

Judging others: Think about it before you do it. (S)

Love of enemy: There are the most difficult words in the bible here - love of enemy - give without expecting anything back. Must be teaching for rich people as poor people have nothing to give away - its the poor who lend the most in reality. (S)

The beatitudes: Verses 20 to 23 are similar to the beatitudes - but verses 43 - 44 what does this mean? (G)

After agreeing we had enjoyed a brief introduction to the process the group agreed to meet regularly to read the Gospel of Luke.

31/5/96

Luke 6: 1 - 5

Characters: Pharisees, Jesus, disciples, David.
Setting: In a grainfield.
Plot: The story is about breaking the law (G), . . . yeah, not to be too hide-bound by the orders sent down by the hierarchy. (S)

It's about doing things on the Sabbath that are considered by some to be unlawful but, Jesus saying there are exceptions to the rule - like if you have the choice of letting someone live on the Sabbath or die you choose the healing - hang on, that's in the next story. In this one what do you do, let somebody die of hunger or do you get the food to feed them. So Jesus is saying there are exceptions to the laws when this is necessary to preserve the life of others. (G)

The old saying - if the needs great enough you got to do it haven't you. (S)

And what's the need here?

Hunger. (C)

So what does this mean today?

Be more lenient on those who some consider are breaking the laws of the church - like not getting here on Sunday or like seeing someone mowing their lawn on a Sunday. (G)

But I still doubt this law breaking gives you 'open sesame' to do what ever takes your fancy- like robbing a fruit shop if you're hungry. (S)

Let's go through the text a little more closely as we may have jumped to some conclusions which might not be there.

[The story was read again audibly]

Is there some kind of principle the story is trying to tell us, like need goes above rules and regulations? (C)

Maybe Jesus is having a go at the super pious folks. (S)

Jesus is saying there are rules and there are his rules and he made the rules so he can break them? (G)

What's the rule being broken here?

The rule of working on the Sabbath.- or maybe there was some other rule that they were breaking, but it doesn't matter because Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath anyway, so he can rewrite the rules if he wants, and here he does because it is important that people don't go hungry. (G)

I don't think Jesus is telling anyone to break the rules unless it's in a great emergency - I don't think it's 'cart blanche' to break all the rules. They are around in the first place for a reason but 'desperate needs need desperate deeds'. (S)

What is the desperate need here in this story?

Hunger and that's a pretty desperate and a real need - you only have to have been hungry to know that - real hungry - like not having any food to eat. (S)

I still don't think shops should be open on a Sunday. Working on Sunday is not a desperate need either. You don't need to do it if you have work on the other days. (G)

There is nothing in the story about shops being open. (C)

Well the Bible does says not to toil on the Sabbath, although it's not in this particular passage. It's a part of the ten commandments! (G)

[The group looked up Exodus 20 and agreed that this was a commandment]

Well then what is Jesus doing in Luke 6? What is happening in the story?

Well is it that law they are breaking or some other law? They are picking the grains and rubbing it between their hands but is that work? I wouldn't call that work- it's just rubbing your food. (C)

But this story shows that the Pharisees thought they were breaking the law by doing this so it must have been work. But as a women, oopps or a man, you have to cook to feed your family on the Sabbath. (S)

Mind you the Seventh Day people would have it all done before. (G)

But Jesus does take exception to the rule. (S)

So what is the exception here?

Hunger - physical need. (S)

So it seems straight forward really. (G)

Luke 6 : 6-11

Characters: The man with the shrivelled hand, Jesus, the Pharisees, and the scribes. Those mean nasty little people - pious little prigs - what would we call them 'thought police' nothing better to do but to collect evidence against Jesus(G), and the crowd.
Setting: In the synagogue with an audience as Jesus was teaching so there must have been someone to teach. (C)
Plot: Jesus was teaching and there was both the congregation and the scribes and Pharisees and they were out to get him and then Jesus knows what is going on so he calls up a man with a withered hand and says: 'I ask you is it lawful to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?' (G)

He was challenging them. (S)

Just because it's the Sabbath day are you not going to help someone on the Sabbath day? It's like saying you should not cook or clean or help a sick person just because it's the Sabbath. (G)

If you've got good reason to do something on the Sabbath or another day - do it. (C)

What's the good reason that Jesus talks about?

To heal - to restore life - to do good. Obviously Jesus was concerned with saving a person's life and Jesus was doing very good. (S)

What happens then?

The Pharisees were furious, because Jesus did it again didn't he. I mean the Pharisees might like to think they are the power but Jesus comes along and disobeys the law in a synagogue in front of all these people and this made them mad. (G)

Is there anything in here that gives us some guidance about what 'rules' you break and what 'rules' you don't?

Is it going to benefit somebody else - will it save lives or destroy it - if it's for your own gain then it is not to be done. (S)

I don't think this rule about the Sabbath is really relevant any more. I think it is about any day of the week. You'll always have someone trying to stop good happening - this says make sure you don't stop doing good and giving life out despite the obstacles put in your way. (G)

I have to work on a Sunday and in light of this story Jesus would not condemn me because he knows everybody's motives and he would understand full well that it is a survival matter. (S)

But that's in contrast to big business open seven days a week and only do to make money for their own profit. This is not the same principle. This is a principle to life that can be applied in many situations. The issue of the Kid's Canteen and its

demise in the Glebe is a case in point. It was closed after a 'religious' person took it over and it finally stopped. (G)

This did nothing for the local kids even though the person thought they were very religious in their behaviour. (S)

A better example was a bloke in Glebe giving his shoes away. (C)

The whole story took place in a 'church' and Jesus undermines the authority of the Pharisees and the scribes - so no wonder they got angry. (G)

Whether it's religious, political or otherwise this story tells us to stand up and be counted even in a place like the church if you think something is going very wrong. By golly when it comes to the crunch and you're on your own and you have to stand up and be counted, it is very difficult. Takes a lot of guts. (S)

This idea could not be used in the other way, that is I need it so give it to me. It's not meant to be taken like that. (G)

It's for the needy not the greedy, so it's a principle to live by for the needy but not the greedy. (C)

7/6/1996

Luke 6 : 17 - 36

Much of the early tape was damaged or not audible. Transcription commences towards the end of discussion about Jesus healing people, with some comments upon how healing could have been achieved through touch in verse 19.

[Do we ?] see this power today?

Not in the same way. (C)

But maybe it's still around today in ways we don't see but haven't we talked about this before? You know how miracles happen today but are called medicine and all that. We don't want to go over old stuff again (S) . . . no let's move on. (G)

Well this is teaching from Jesus rather than a story about Jesus but it doesn't hurt to ask our questions again.

Characters: Jesus and the disciples.
Setting: After some discussion it was agreed that it was 'a level place'.

So the plot really is what do we think Jesus is saying to us today?

Well for me the blessings are words of great hope. (S)

What do you mean? You don't mean it's good to be poor or sad or hated do you? So it can't be saying that to me otherwise it makes no sense at all. I mean for me today its got to say blessed are you who are poor, because things will change because of God's way in his kingdom or world or whatever. (G)

Well my, my, you have got a run on. (S) [laughter]

Ok, you tell me what you think? (G)

Well I think you're right, don't you Colin? Suffering is not condoned. Neither can we say that poverty or hunger or sadness are good things here in the Glebe or anywhere else. Surely a blessing would mean they would come to an end. For me that's what they say. Blessed are the poor because you won't be poor any more. (S)

And it's clearer with the next verse which says now you're hungry but then you will be filled up with food, so it really is about Jesus saying that we should bring an end to suffering of this kind and that's what we are meant to do here in the church in Glebe. (S)

As long as nobody takes advantage of it. (C)

We've got to talk about that when we get down to the bit about giving stuff away. (S)

Well you know what I mean. (C)

So what about verse 23 where it says your reward will be in heaven?

Well that's right. Do your best. Get rid of suffering and then you will have a party in heaven. (G)

For a long time! (S) [laughter]

Which is different for the people who get the woes that follow. (G)

It's not hard to tell who they are. The rich and powerful who abuse their privilege. Greedy people like the Connells and the Skases (S) . . . don't forget the Packers and Murdochs (G) . . . oh, I'm not. Smirking pictures in the paper with so much money they don't know what to do and never giving a stuff about the way people live here in Glebe or even in other countries where people are sick from no food. It's disgusting when you think about it. (S)

I have no trouble with the woes at all. They're not for me anyway. But I think there are some people out there who should give them some thought or change their ways as soon as possible. (G)

And you see them today in the media and Woman's Day and all of them speak well of the rich people. You know articles and pictures, so verse 26 is quite scary when you think of it especially if you have a big profile because you're rich (S) . . . and keep it all to yourself. (C)

Anything else you want to say about these verses?

[Silence]

Not really they seem clear. (S)

Isn't 'woe' a funny word? (G)

Ok. What about the next part of what Jesus has to say?

Verses 27-36

These are the very hard words of Jesus. You know there are so many examples I could give you of people here who just keep having a go at you. I won't say her name but that woman who keeps asking John for money and then is so rude to us all. I feel like she's an enemy and yet I'm told to love enemies, or people I really don't like so I have real problems here. I don't think I can really do it very well. (S)

We can't ignore this teaching of Jesus just because we find it difficult. It's pretty straight forward teaching as well. Nothing too hard to understand. (G)

But hard to put in practice. I mean getting belted in the face twice? (S)

Well we can't avoid the words there there. But I think if people are in need or trouble, we would not turn our backs on them if they were in genuine need. (G)

If they were in trouble we would try to do our best . But blow this going back and back to get shot down in flames again and again. I've had so much of it in my time. (S)

I don't think God wants us to repeatedly put ourselves in the firing line but to pull back a bit and look for signs or places for reconciliation. (G)

Very hard to do good to those who hate you, and I've tried to bless those who curse me - but it has seemed sometimes to make things worse! (S)

So how do we take the meaning?

Well they are difficult words but you have to give it your best shot and try your best to have a go at it. (S)

I have given away my last cent quite literally and then thought hell what am I going to do and then just when you're right on the brink, God seems to yank you back and somebody comes to the rescue. (G)

It's another one that's hard because you can't give to everyone who asks you because you would run out of money, not even with our benevolent fund in Glebe. People can take advantage of it you know. (S)

So what does verse 30 mean in the Glebe?

Well it's open to abuse and so you would have to work out what was a genuine request and what was not. (G)

Those who are genuinely in need you give. (S)

We know families in this area who have hungry kids but won't ask for hand-outs and then there are those who live by the charities. You need to know what is a genuine ask and what isn't. (G)

What about verse 31?

Well fair enough (S) . . . Yes (G) . . . I pretty much try to live by that rule (S) . . . Its not too hard. Colin ? (G) . . . Yes it's a rule isn't it. (C).

And the next verses 32-36?

God's portrayed as kind and merciful, and we are to be the same - simple! (S)

But if you go back to the first bit I think it's easy to live with those who love you. (G)

The part where it says love the enemy is not so easy. (S)

It's not so easy to give things away to people who will not be able to do anything for you. (G)

You get frustrated, browned off and disillusioned if you keep doing that I think so it's not easy to do. (S)

We are mere humans so it is difficult. (G)

But as we said before give it your best shot! (C)

If we can't do it in one way try to do it in another. The other thing is that we all have different resources so maybe all this is meant to be done in co-operation with each other. (S)

That's it you with each other. (G)

What one person cannot achieve another person in your community might be able to achieve. (S)

I also think this teaching might be to rich people. It seems to me that they might be the ones who have the money to give away. (G)

14/6/1996

Luke 6: 37-49

Verses 37-38

What does it mean?

I think it's self explanatory. Don't judge other people because you're not perfect yourself and don't judge others because when others judge you you'll get your back up as well. Simple teaching really. (S)

If you're generous, rather than being selfish, then God will repay you but not necessarily in ways that you might expect. For example it does not just mean money it also means time and energy and your capabilities and other non-material as well as material things and then you'll get rewarded by that. I don't think it means if you give money to charity you'll get rich. It means other things. (G)

Yes it is straight forward. But its not always easy not to be judgemental. Forgiveness comes in here but that is really hard sometimes. Giving to others doesn't just mean cold hard cash as some of us don't have that to give away, but we have other things to give away. (S)

And you shouldn't just do something that you do to get it back better. In fact some times you need to have this kind of thing happen to you. Tomorrow I've got St Vincent De Paul coming to assist me because I have real trouble with some bills at the moment but I don't feel guilty about that at all. I have never taken off them and when I can I give what I have away. I don't feel guilty asking for this help - maybe this time it's ok to ask and I don't think God would mind me asking this time. (G)

And what about verse 39 what do you think this might mean.?

Giving advice about something you don't know about. If you're ignorant then leave it alone, or trying to tell people how to live or not live a particular lifestyle, especially if you've not lived it yourself. (C)

It basically means clean your own stable out first before you start telling everybody else about how dirty their stable is and don't give everybody your opinion with a big dose of arrogance because you may not be seeing clearly yourself because of what's in your life. (S)

It's the same with this stuff about a student is not above the teacher. If you're a student you can't tell your teacher what to do. I know for myself that I would have liked to do this but you know you can't. It's like when we say I really don't like that verse, could you retranslate it for me so it's easier to take and that's what a lot of people do you know but if it's there we shouldn't try to change it we may just have to say we didn't understand it or can't hack it. (G)

Verse 41 and 42 is really straight forward even like Jesus cracking a joke. (S)

It's the same as before. (C)

Once you start to try to see all kinds of special meanings in some of this stuff you really lose the plot. There's nothing mystical here it's straight forward teaching about how we should behave. Even if it is difficult to do it. The Lord is telling us as it is. There's no need to make it complicated. (G)

Verses 43-46

These words of Jesus worry me a bit because in today's society or era with parents sometimes you find exemplary parents that have a child or children that are dreadful and don't reflect the character of the parents at all and other times you see parents that are drunks or gamblers or no-hopers with really great children, beautiful children. (S)

Do you think this is what Jesus is talking about?

Well that's how I read it. (S)

I think the bit 'for each tree is known by its own fruit' in verse 44 means take each person on their own merits, so take everybody for what they are - good or bad. (G)

I'm not sure I agree it means that. (S)

I'm confused too. (C)

My father is evil but that doesn't make me evil. If you have a thief for a father it doesn't mean you will be a thief! So don't look at my father who is such an evil evil man and say therefore his offspring must be like he is because that isn't true. Take each one of us individually. (G)

I see what you mean and I understand that. (S)

But the fact is that good trees do bear bad fruit and bad trees do bear good fruit if you talk in the way of parents and children. For example what about little Judy, this is a child, Andrew, who turns up for our church here in the Glebe and who turns up in winter with no shoes or jumper and her parents are in the pub! (S)

Could it mean anything other than that kind of imagery, that is families?

Well what have you got in mind? (S)

I haven't - it then goes onto say in verses 45 - 46 about the heart and the mouth?

I think what it is saying is that there is good and evil and good and bad people out there and the good people bring good things from the inside out to show to others. (G)

I don't understand the bit about the mouth and the heart at the end. (S)

Would we use any other word for the heart today?

Like brain? But isn't there a big difference between the heart and the mind? (G)

Maybe it's saying you can't pick good fruit from really thorny bushes? (S)

If you see a prickly personality you should look at the good things the grapes and the fruit and try to nurture that. (G)

But that's so hard isn't it to do that! Mind you, you can still pick a rose from a thorny bush! [Shirley broke into song and sang the 'red rose and the briar'.] (S)

This imagery doesn't take account of the thistle or the prickly heather, all beautiful flowers but in very nasty bushes. But is a beautiful flower the same as a fruit? I think we are a bit unsure of our imagery. (S)

Verses 46-49

This is a much easier story to understand isn't it, about doing not just knowing or believing but doing it. (G)

I think it means why do you acknowledge me and don't do as I tell you. (S)

It means we build our lives around the word of God and we have to try and live it out but we don't always get it perfect, but we attempt to the better part to live our lives according to God's words. (G)

But isn't there a difference here between two groups of people. One who say but don't do and the others who say and do do! That's like it is everywhere so there are the doers and the talkers. (S)

I come from a Catholic upbringing in Ireland, and I was taught and it was drummed into me as a young girl, 'In all your ways acknowledge him and he shall direct your paths'. So that's how I still think I read it in a kind of spiritual way. I know it's not there but that's the way I perceive it. (G)

[Shirley then broke into song again singing the 'Three Little Pigs', with reference to what the houses were built out of.]

Chapter 7: 1- 10

Now that's a better story isn't it. (G) [General agreement]

Characters : Jesus, the centurion, the centurion's servant, one well and one unwell.
Setting : Capernaum - a town, but we don't know where it is. (G)
Plot: A valued servant is sick and had heard of the miracles that Jesus had done and so goes to get Jesus to heal his servant but thinks he is unworthy to have Jesus come under his roof but has enough faith to think that Jesus could heal from afar. (G)

I like that it's a wonderful exercise in humility. That centurion wasn't a proud man who thought too much of himself. It's a great example. 'Lord I am unworthy that thou should come under my roof, but speak thy word only and my soul shall be healed': I used to recite that before taking communion. (S)

So verse 9 talks about faith of the centurion - what is that about ?

That Jesus doesn't even have to be with the servant to heal the servant. (G)

They didn't feel it was going to happen unless they were touched. (S)

So what does it mean today?

A lot today. We haven't seen Jesus walking up and down Glebe Point Road but we have the faith that God hears our prayers and that Jesus did walk the earth

and did perform these miracles and that through faith this can still happen. So just like the centurion - we don't see Jesus but have the same faith and be humble about it. (G)

Even more so today for us than the centurion, all we have is the history. The Bible is our history book of what Jesus said and did. We have that to look back on so we accept the words that we hear in the story and go by our experiences of what we see in every day life and the many miracles that still occur if you are willing to see them. (S)

Luke 7 : 11-17

I like this story as it shows directly Jesus' compassion. His heart went out to that women. It shows he really had feelings and his heart was probably breaking, even though that's not the way they word it. (G)

It is the Christ Incarnate here really in the flesh. You know sometimes he sounds a bit grumpy, like woe to you who are rich (general laughter). It's real human stuff. (S)

No, this really is a story that shows Jesus in the flesh, as a person with real feelings because he heals the dead son, but he didn't have too. The woman never asked him to do it. (G)

Yes it is! Jesus approached her because he saw how upset she was and she didn't approach Jesus. (S)

She didn't have any faith like the centurion - but she did have faith afterwards. If she's included in all the people at the end of the story that is. (G)

So Jesus heals someone. They don't ask. No-one demonstrates faith. It was just Jesus doing it out of compassion. That's new! (C)

God has come to help his people. There you are. You don't have to say it at all, you can do it in actions and here in this story people all marvel and spread the word about what Jesus is doing. (G)

Well what does the story say today?

God knows what we need and we don't have to ask, because he cares. (S)

What does this story say to those people who say if you have enough faith you will be healed ?

Well makes one wonder doesn't it?(S)

It doesn't say in this story that at all in fact it is only from sheer compassion that Jesus heals. (G)

And it also says that Jesus takes every circumstance on its merits. She was a widow who had no one left to help. Her only son had died and Jesus wants to do something about her situation and he does it then and there. Jesus felt she had a legitimate need. He just went out and did it for her. Like some people say I asked God and God did not help me - but you have to ask what were they asking for and what was their needs. Now the women doesn't ask and is a bit of a comparison for those people. (G)

So maybe you don't have a whole lot of faith for Jesus to be interested in you - now that's not what you normally hear. (C)

Does this mean anything specific for you today ?

Yes it does! It doesn't write you off entirely if your faith is not up to scratch and that's good news in fact. It doesn't mean Jesus is not going to do something in your life if you haven't faith at all. Jesus won't write you off in fact - God's not writing anybody off at all. (S)

So those people who say I can't go into church because the roofs going to fall in because I'm such a terrible person - this says there is hope for them because God sees the person as they really are. (G)

It says no matter who you are Jesus will still bring you back to life and give you new life. (S)

28/6/96

Luke 7 :18-50

I don't really understand a lot of this. (S)

Characters: Jesus/ John the Baptist/ the disciples of John/ two of them/ the Pharisees (they keep popping up them lot! (S)) / crowd.
Setting: Doesn't really say unless you take it he was still in Nain. (S)
Plot: I have no idea (G)

John the Baptist must have heard about Jesus and sends his disciples to check him out and the answer is in verse 22, but what does verse 23 mean 'the man or the one who does not fall away on account of me'? (S)

Does it mean the one who does not take offence at Jesus - I don't know - the word doesn't make sense. But I think it means that Jesus says to the disciples of John, 'go away and tell him you've found the right guy'. (G)

I can't make any sense of the bit in verse 23, especially the fall away bit'. I will look this bit up in my own translation when I get home. The idea that it might mean lose faith on account of Jesus does not make sense. (S)

I've got a new translation. It's the Good News Bible (GNB) which says 'happy are those who have no doubts about me'. Now that's very different. Maybe it means they'd fall away because they thought he was a phoney, maybe this was what it meant. (G)

Maybe it's said because John is having doubts about Jesus. Maybe it was a backhanded rebuke at John. (S)

Maybe they were having a dispute. (G)

I can't see it like that. (S)

But John did send the people to find out about Jesus, so maybe it is a bit of a push off statement. (G)

I thought they were friends (S)

I thought they were cousins - shouldn't he know he was the right one? Of all people he shouldn't have doubts. (G)

Now the plot thickens when in verse 24 Jesus talks to the crowd about John and says all that stuff about John ending up again with verse 28 - no one is greater than John yet he who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater then he. (S)

What does that mean?

[laughter] What, who, how? (C)

One of the divine mysteries I think. (S)

Maybe he was having a big go at the crowd after having a big go at John. He was having a bad hair day! (G)

I really don't think this makes any sense. We seem to need more information or something. What do you think Andrew? Would a commentary help here? (S)

Yes well let's see if we can make some sense out of it. Who is the greatest person in the Glebe?

[no answer]

Well what would it mean if Jesus came to the Glebe and said of the greatest person that even the least was greater than he. Is this Jesus saying everybody is equal?

[no answer]

Maybe we should move on a bit and see if that helps. (G)

OK, let's see what we make of verses 31 -35.

This also ends with a very obscure verse in verse 35. (G)

I think it means that Jesus was saying you can't please people no matter what you do. Some people will not change their minds about some things. (S)

I'm not sure with that. (G)

I can't make hide nor hare out of it. (C)

Can we move onto the story in verse 36? Stories that have a kind of shape to them make more sense than some of the other stuff. (G)

Verses 36 - 50.

Characters: The Pharisee, the wicked women and Jesus.
Setting : In the home of a Pharisee
Plot: Well there was a sinful women who somehow got into the Pharisees house (S) . . . we have no idea how she got in, might have been an act of sheer desperation (G) . . . we don't really know what the houses were like or how she got in but she did! (S)

She must have been prepared because she brought with her the jar of alabaster ointment. (S)

Then she stood behind Jesus and wept and wiped her tears off his feet with her hair. (G)

That's a lovely gesture you know. (S)

Then she put perfume on and in terms of the story back then Jesus feet were fairly dirty probably. (G)

Then the Pharisee begins to be very cynical straight away - no matter what Jesus does he is wrong it seems. (C)

The Jesus tells a story of two people in debt - one with a big debt and one not so big - and Jesus asks who will love the creditor more? - and the answer is the one who owed the most and Jesus tells him he is right and then goes onto to have a big go at the Pharisee saying what he didn't do but what the woman did do. And then it ends up with she who loves much has forgiven a lot - no I'm not sure I've got that right - no it doesn't make sense again. (G)

Anyway the women is let go with 'Go your faith has saved you'. (S)

What's the story mean in our modern world of Glebe today?

Well the Pharisee having the party would be some of the decent right thinking people, conservative folks around today - possibly the Archbishop or a cardinal so this person invites Jesus over to dinner and then what happens (S) . . . a prostitute from Kings Cross walks in (G) . . . and then does the washing of the feet with her tears and wipes the tears with her hair, kisses them and then pours perfume on them (S) . . . oh sure, in the Archbishop's house [general laughter] (G) . . . well yes it might teach him a thing or two (S) . . . maybe that's what he's worried about - learning a thing or two about what he assumes he already knows (G) . . . mind you she probably wouldn't get that far (S) . . . and then he tells the story and tells the Archbishop that he didn't do anything like the woman did (G) . . . he thinks he's too

powerful to do that - he thought it was beneath him probably, but the woman didn't think like that and was overcome with love for Jesus that she did what she did and she had nothing else but her tears and her hair and dried feet with her hair - I think that's one of the classic examples of love what this woman did, you know that's love of the purest kind - unreserved love - I think this was a good woman - a great woman (S) . . . was she kneeling at his feet or was he reclining so it wouldn't be quite like getting under a dining room table but at his feet nevertheless (G) . . . there's nothing wrong with that you know when it's your choice to show love (S) . . . and Jesus forgives her sin so everybody gets upset and Jesus says go your faith has saved you. (G)

So what does it mean today?

I think it means don't lose faith no matter who you are and be careful how you treat other people. (G)

I think it was an act of faith and Jesus still does the same thing for women like this today. He still forgives in this day and age the same as he did with her. It was a real outpouring of love and an act of faith and even some kind of repentance maybe. (S)

Maybe she was repenting of something, but that's not clear from the story. (G)

It's a good story that says don't be afraid of your emotions. (S)

Is the story shocking ?

Yes it is in a number of ways. You know it takes a lot of guts to kneel at a person's feet and to tell a person what you really think. I know I've done it. Right here in the Glebe up beside the Valhalla when I met an actor I really worshipped and I knelt down and said I really loved his work and he was a master and then he lifted me up and thanked me because he saw I really meant it. (S)

Reminds me of the movie 'Up Close and Personal'. That's about love and commitment in a way like the woman shows in the story. It's a full on commitment. (G)

In fact this story is a bit shocking today as we are all taught to hold it all in - don't show your emotions but this story is very physical and emotional - not what you'd expect in an Archbishop's house! (S)

And she was a real risk taker as well because she wanted to see Jesus and walked into the Pharisee's house and she had the faith that she could go in and do what she did with Jesus and so she was a real risk taker. (G)

5/7/96

Luke 8: 1-3

Characters: Jesus, the twelve, some women, including those healed of evil spirits, Mary, and then Joanna, Susanna and many others.
Setting: On the road travelling through cities and villages.
Plot: Jesus did not travel alone. He had the twelve and women with him. (G)

Those cured were loyal to Jesus and they were supporting Jesus out of their own means. (G)

I don't understand that. Who were they supporting? (S)

Everyone else. (G)

So we learn that Jesus was travelling around with the 'twelve' and had at least three women that were named and others as well, and that the women who were there were supporting them out of their own means. Does this come as a surprise?

What because there are women there? (S)

Not really. That they were helping to support is interesting because women were mostly in the house in the old fashion way, so it is interesting that they were there and they weren't there for a free ride. They did their bit as well. (G)

At least one of them had a rich husband, but it's surprising that he let her go. They must have been tolerant men in a way. (S)

Maybe he was pleased to have the demons out of her. (C)

No she wasn't one with the demons was she? (S)

It is a good point because it depends on how you read it whether Joanna is one of the women cured of demons or not. She may be a separate person. (G)

But then being diseased was a form of evil wasn't it? (G)

Well does it mean anything for us today?

Don't look for any free rides - if you want God's continued love and support we can't just sit back and wait for it to happen we have to do our bit like the women in the story. (S)

Luke 8 : 4 - 15

Characters: The sower and the seed and the 'things they fell into'.
Setting: A field with all different types of soil.
Plot: This is fairly simple and well-known. If you have ears to hear then hear, and then there is the bit in the middle (verses 9-10) which doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Why did he have to do it? A simple story and he puts this in as well! Perhaps it only makes sense when taken from the bit before it. You may hear something but not get the meaning, you can see something, but not recognise it or them. (G)

But it was the disciples who had asked Jesus what the parable meant even though they had been given the secrets of the kingdom and others would only have things in parable form and hence not see or hear properly. This does not make sense. (S)

I do not like what these verses say. It seems that the parables are meant to confuse people, but the explanation of Jesus about the parable is good and understandable. (G)

Does this parable mean anything to you today in the Glebe?

Yes I think it does, and it would have without all that other stuff in the middle, and it would have been better for the disciples to leave well enough alone because it was making good sense all along. The disciples made a mess of it because they'd been looking for all kinds of hidden marvels and wonders which was not there. It means what it said! And so today in the Glebe the good news falls on rock as there are a lot of people who don't even hear it in the first place. Then there are those who feel a little enchanted at first, but fall off when things get tough and then there are the ones who get so caught up in the day to day traumas and dramas they feel are not getting their two bobs worth and don't hang in there to finish it. Or they think they can go it alone and it gets a bit choked then and they fall by the way side and don't mature. (S)

It's the age old thing when people think they'll turn to God or participate in something here in our church group, the drop in or whatever, and think they'll get what they want straight away, and when they don't they get angry and leave and don't come back (G) . . . it's there own agenda. (S)

So if some people can't get immediate responses they don't follow on with it. (G)

Ok but what about the seed that falls on good soil and produces a 'good crop'. What's a good crop in the Glebe?

Our Fellowship here is a good crop, it's just not a growing crop. (G)

But there are a lot of jolly good crops outside the Fellowship as well like the Calluzzos up the road who own the fruit shop and do great things for the local community. In fact some of the good crops in the Glebe may not even be part of a church. A lot of good people exist quite outside the established church. (S)

While the parable does not say anything about the church or relate it in anyway to having to be the church - it relates to good people who hear God's word and do good things but may not be a part of the church. (G)

What are signs of this good crop?

One of the really good things is a person's interaction with their fellow man who are prepared to help without looking for any gain for themselves. Unreserved generosity of spirit that seeks the best for other people. (S)

Gifts of food and clothing and the giving of time were all identified as producing a good crop. People in the Glebe who are a good crop give what they can - they can't all afford worldly goods, but they give what they can. (G).

Luke 8: 16 -18

Oh dear, another verse that seems to make little sense. You know if you look at each verse carefully verse 16 and 17 make sense. It seems common sense statements made sense. (G)

So verse 16 means 'don't hide your light under a bushel' - that's in Matthew isn't it? (S) . . . If you have good news don't keep it from others. (G)

Verse 17 doesn't have any hidden meanings either unless it means be sure your sins will find you out. Once the lights on all your little idiosyncrasies will come out. I don't know if that's got anything to do with it or not. (S)

You might think God doesn't know what you do, but God knows all. (G)

Verse 18 doesn't make a lot of sense in terms of what it is saying by itself. (G)

Well it is about listening so . . . (S)

[Silence]

Therefore consider carefully how you listen, for whoever listens carefully will understand but whoever does not listen carefully will not understand at all and will lose the understanding. So the Pharisees who thought they had everything, but did not listen, lost it all in the end! (G) . . . as you slowly come to understand you will be enlightened but if you misuse it all God will take it all from you and you'll have nothing (G) . . . don't get too cocky (S) . . . yes its for those who see themselves as theologians or the Kerry Packers of the world who think they know everything. Even if you think you've got it, it can be ungot. (G)

It's the word on listening that makes sense of what follows. (S)

Luke 8: 19-21

It's a bit of reprimand there isn't it? (S)

The text does make it sound like it's his mother and siblings but they would only be his half brothers so to speak [this lead to some laughter in the group]. (G)

But this text says his brothers full stop! (S)

The story line is simple. Everyone is Jesus' family (C)

Maybe it's saying just because it's the mother and brothers of Jesus it doesn't give then special privileges. It's a bit rude - Jesus told his mother off at the wedding in Cana as well. (S)

Maybe Jesus is knowing he only has a limited time to do what he's got to do so he tells them not to waste his time. (G)

That's a bit rough and rude. How would you feel if you were the mother? (C)

I'd feel a bit miffed. I think Mary was long suffering and if it was me I'd have given him a good clip over the ear. (S)

He was under a lot of pressure wasn't he? (G)

[Silence]

He wasn't here to be a family boy, but had other things to do (C)

Mind you it doesn't give us anything else like that in the story, does it? What if Pavarotti said this from the stage. It would be very hurtful to his family. (S)

What is Jesus saying then?

Don't think that family is privileged, you are all my family. (G)

Wouldn't it want you make to paddle his backside for being so rude? (S)

I think they would have been very hurt you know. (G)

If Jesus wasn't being deliberately hurtful then what do you think he was saying ?

That all those who did what God's word demanded were part of his family. (G)

But he wasn't very tactful. (S)

Jesus was on a short time scale. (G)

But did he know that at this stage? (S)

Does this story mean anything today?

That Jesus loves us all. (G)

In its most positive sense it's about all are welcome. (S)

I am hoping that he was having another bad hair day. (S)

But lets remind ourselves of what Jesus actually says - 'my mothers and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice, or hear the word of God and do it.' What have they got to do?

What they hear from God. (S)

That's all?

That's all. (G)

Luke 8 : 22-25

Characters: Jesus and the disciples, the storm and the raging sea and the little boat.
Setting: On a lake
Plot: Jesus being asleep in the midst of a storm.

There must have been some doubt in their mind. Jesus being in the boat would keep them safe by itself no matter how rough things go and so it's a simple message and easy to accept. If you have faith and Jesus is with you, then things will go ok. (S)

I think in effect this is testing of one's faith while are you doubting and dangling over the edge with Jesus. (G)

12/7/96

[The question of translations was raised by the readers and how different versions of the Bible had some English words translated differently. The group decided to begin to compare what different versions had to say.]

Luke 8: 26-56

The reading was considered in two sections:

Verses 26-39

Major characters: Jesus and the disciples, the man who was possessed by demons, the pigs and the pig herders, and all the people came from the town.
Setting: In the country opposite Galilee, but other than that don't really know. But it was outside, near a town and near tombs (S) . . . And it was near farm land because of the pigs. (S)

Lets look at the plot carefully so that all the major movements of the story are considered; so we don't miss anything or think something is in the story when it is not. So what is the plot?

A nude mad man running around the region who was terrified when he saw Jesus, (G) . . . he didn't want to be punished or as this version says tortured, which is very different. Punishment is very different to torture which is much more physical, it is never non-painful (B) . . . the RSV says 'torment'. (S)

Jesus ordered the evil spirit to go out and it looks to me that this poor fellow was used to being punished or tortured all his life because it says that he was expecting to get more from Jesus - ill-used for so long that he was kind of expecting it. But still he recognised Jesus as the Son of the Most High God, and in

a sense displays some strength of character by not running away, and asking for mercy. (S)

Look at what Jesus says in verse 29, because he had ordered the evil spirit to go out of him. I don't know what that means? (S)

Well my interpretation is the evil spirit talking through him is separate to the man and the man was so used to the spirit being there that he didn't know how dreadful it would be to have the evil spirit called out. (G)

The next part goes on to talk about the chains that he had broken and Jesus asks him what is his name and he says Legion. But is that the man or is it the demon? Its very confusing. (S)

At the beginning part it says Jesus ordered the evil spirit to go but when we get to verse 30 it says many spirits had entered the man - plural spirits. (G)

That's what Legion or mob meant isn't it? (S)

So Jesus ordered one out in verse 29 and then there were many and they asked not to be cast out and the poor man possessed is standing in the middle of all this. (G)

They didn't want to go out so they asked not to be cast into the abyss, (S) . . . nice word isn't it, (B) . . . what is it do you reckon? (G)

Nothingness. It is different to hell because 'if there's not in a person that is living and breathing' - they can't survive. (B)

They then get put into the pigs and I hear some people say what a dreadful thing for the herdsman who lost his living. (Izzy)

There would be a lot of pork stew on the table that night wouldn't there. (G)

Hang on they didn't eat pork (B) . . . no that's right nothing with a cloven hoof (S) . . . so what are the pigs doing in this land? Maybe we are in a place that is not Jewish. (B)

Were the Pharisees Jews? (G) . . . oh yes they were Jewish religious leaders. (B)

The story is straight forward after that. The pigs drown and when the man is dressed and in his right mind the people become afraid. The man wants to follow Jesus but does not because Jesus says to go and tell the townspeople what had happened and the people were so frightened they wanted Jesus to go. (S)

See now, in this story the person who was healed was allowed to talk about it which is different to other stories where the person healed was told to tell nobody. Why? (G)

Maybe because this guy was allowed to go back to the town and tell the people so they could overcome the fear that they had of Jesus. (B)

What does it say to us today ?

People are afraid of what they don't understand. (S)

If you're a bit different people call you a crackpot. (Izzy)

People with diseases like Parkinson's disease or Turret syndrome are often treated as outcasts around here. (G)

Remember a man called 'Allan Cunningham' who had Turret syndrome who lived around the streets, he was nicknamed Legion by people in the Glebe. (B)

There is often wrongful dismissal for people with psychological disorders as well. (G)

So are you saying that psychological disorders are the demons of today?

Well we have a lot of schizophrenics in Glebe and that's a modern form of demon, (Izzy) . . . And a lot of it is drug induced and that's another demon here in Glebe - drugs that is. (G).

I do believe in demons whatever form they take. I really think it can happen (S) . . . I don't know about that. I knew a woman who was mentally ill and who a Pentecostal minister said was demon possessed. (G)

So is there a difference?

Well I don't know. (G)?

But we do believe in evil here (S) . . . I think that man in Tasmania must be demon possessed whatever you want to call it - it is evil or Satanic - just like being demon possessed. (G)

There must have been something more powerful than just mental illness driving this person to kill so many people. (B)

I swear that my Father is demon possessed - I have seen him be and do very evil things and he used to make me talk to Beelzebub and yelled at me if I didn't. He was a really evil person. And he wasn't that drunk because this was Star Trek night and he never got drunk on Star Trek night and the nights he was really drunk and violent he didn't talk. (G)

Are there any other forms ?

Hang on - I wouldn't say people suffering from mental illness are demon possessed. There is not evil in these people in the way we have identified it in others. (S)

Does this story say anything more in view of what you have already said ?

Well it does say that demons are afraid of good. I'm not afraid to walk around Glebe at night. God is with me! (Izzy)

So this says that the demons shouldn't have the final word. I think if your love of God is strong then the demons can't take a hold of it. (B)

It is amazing that the crowd told Jesus to get lost. They are scared or maybe ungrateful. (S)

They have had this bloke going mad for so long it has given them something to whinge about and then something great happens. The man is healed from all of

this and instead of saying how wonderful it is, here we have a whole person back into our community, they say get lost. (G)

Perhaps they just didn't understand - it was fear and superstition. (B)

There is nothing there about being ungrateful. The people were afraid. (S)

The guy who was healed was grateful however which only goes to show don't judge a book by its cover. (G)

Do we see any healing today?

Yes! (G) [everyone agreed]

Well Raymond suffers from schizophrenia and now has written two books about his experience and works through the mental health system and takes his medication and I think that is a miracle of healing. (S)

I was able to be a musician even though I was unable to see properly and hear properly at one time. (Izzy)

What about all the people who leave the church and then come back. That's a form of healing isn't it. (G).

I reckon this bloke that was healed was facing an uphill battle. He would have had a lot of hard work to be accepted by the people you know. It's a bit like when I became a Protestant and got baptised as an adult and all my Catholic Irish and Welsh friends didn't talk to me. (G)

It's a rather wonderful story isn't it. (B)

It is good you finally turned up Izzy. You know I have been asking her for some time Andrew. (S)

It is good to have you here Izzy, and Bruce as well, after some time away.

Will you be coming back Izzy? (S)

Well I have been asked by Shirley many times but it's only today I came along. It's not what I expected. I thought you said it was a Bible study and expected a man out the front telling me what it means. (Izzy)

Oh no we don't do that here! Its' different. No one's out the front, and we tell him what it means. (S)

[laughter]

19/7/96

Today I have brought my Jerusalem Bible. You know I reckon it is a better translation than the Good News Bible. (S)

Well I'll stick to the Good News as I can understand it better than the others. (G)

Same here (C)

Well let's commence our reading and then have a look at the characters, setting and the plot as we usually do.

Luke 9 : 1-6

Characters: Jesus and the twelve.
Setting: An unknown place, but from one village to another.
Plot: Jesus giving the twelve their assignment. To preach the Kingdom of God and drive out demons and heal the sick, and to take nothing with them other than what's on the list. He also tells them to go to house to house and if they don't welcome them to shake the dust off their feet so that must have been an insult in those days (G) . . . I'm not sure what that means [S] . . . It must have meant something negative (C) . . . I don't want anything to do with you is what it means I reckon, its probably like the medieval times when you slapped someone on the face to insult them (G) . . . It says it is a sign against them [S] . . . I could think of a number of modern day equivalents. [much laughter] (C)

If Jesus came to Glebe today and he gave his disciples the same instructions here what would he say not to take ?

Food, spare clothing, anything to help you along - for all your personal hygiene needs rely on the people who put you up. (G)

They wouldn't do too good if they came on the off week to pension cheque. (S)

Oh they'd get something, a bowl of soup maybe. (G)

If people don't give them anything then they tell them 'up yours' and move on. (C)

So no food no clothes and no change of undies. (G)

That'd be a leap of faith. (S) [great laughter]

I meant the whole thing not just the undies bit. (G)

What does it mean today?

Well as Jesus' disciples we are empowered to be on ministry out there doing good, but for the rest of it the ideas going through my head are too far fetched in this day and age. (G)

I would find it very hard to go to visit someone empty handed today. (S)

So there's a cultural difference?

Yes. (S) [General agreement]

And you'd feel grubby and need a change of clothes. (S)

Well it might be too far fetched but it seems to say if you have faith then your needs will be provided. (G)

Yes it's another leap of faith - that's not so far fetched. (S)

Maybe we are so concerned about getting things that we have forgotten the old thing about God providing for us if we are doing what we are called to do. (C)

But it's not like that blessings theology - you know follow Jesus and if you're good you'll get rich - it's not that rubbish. (S)

I mean God provides our basic needs every single day. I mean we have clothes, we have a roof over our heads, have good friends and company, there's no necessity to be lonely - our needs are provided. There's always some sort of food and if we hear there is someone in trouble we'll get some food to them. (G)

What about verse 5 today?

For the human psyche I think it's spot on about how we feel and that's what you'd want to do isn't it, but it's not too polite today. (S)

It is the same as the Mormons currently visiting the area. I'd like them to get out of the 'village'. (G)

If they came to my place they wouldn't even get a bowl of soup. (C)

Verses 7 -9

Characters: Herod, John the Baptist, Elijah and prophets.
Setting: Not clear.
Plot: People must have been talking with all sorts of rumours about who Jesus was and Herod says it can't be John because I had him beheaded, but we have not read that yet in Luke, and Herod wants to see Jesus. (S)

Does it mean anything?

Not really it's just a piece of information about Herod the person in political power who wanted to see Jesus. (C)

It reinforces what I thought about Herod. He wasn't one hundred percent bad. He didn't want to behead John anyway and here he wants to see Jesus? (S)

He wanted to make sure Jesus wasn't the reincarnation of John or anybody else. (G)

Anything else?

No let's move on. (G)

Verses 10 - 17

Characters: At least 5000 people, because it's only counting the men, Jesus, apostles or the twelve, (and the fish and the bread).
Setting: Bethsaida - a desert place or a 'remote place'.
Plot: That so many had come to hear Jesus speak that the twelve are concerned about there being too many to feed but Jesus says no that's not how we are going to do it - we will feed them ourselves out of what we have got. (S) . . . It must have been an all day session and he must have been in a good mood because he welcomed them!! And he said to the disciples instead of going outside use your own resources feed them with what you've got. (G)

Where's the small boy? Isn't it in one of the stories in another account? (S)

[The group looked up parallel accounts in Matthew and John and Mark. The group discovered the boy was located in John.]

Isn't it interesting that there are different accounts of the same story. (S)

Like little details that are different or people in one and not the other. (G)

Does this matter to you when you read the Gospels and come across different accounts of the same story?

Not really. The story tellers were human and writing in different places and all told their own version. (G)

Maybe some had selective memory loss and they only wrote down what suited their story (G) . . . some of them see more relevance in some aspects that others maybe and anyway any two people will see the same thing in different ways (S) . . . and some record details only and some everything (C) . . . It's like if we here read Romeo and Juliett and got asked to write what we saw in the play we would each one write something different but we would all have read or seen the same thing. (G)

But this is not a matter of concern in terms of the story or how we read it or its truthfulness. (S)

[general consensus]

I have always wondered why women are not mentioned? (S)

I think the word men is meant to include women and maybe we should read it as people? (G)

So what does the story mean in the Glebe or anywhere else today?

God will provide. (G)

Or people like the Caluzzo's will provide. (C)

Jesus was the sort of person who was worried about people being hungry so wherever he can he will provide, but it is up to us to do our bit as well. That's why the disciples got told to do something, not just send the people away. (S)

He made sure there was enough wine at the party and food to go round. (G)

This is not spiritual or pious stuff but a real concern for the needs of people who are hungry and he gets the disciples to take responsibility as well. (G)

It's a good story. (S)

9/8/96

Luke 9 : 18 - 62

Verses 18 - 22.

Characters: Jesus, the disciples and Peter.
The setting: In private.
The plot: About Jesus wanting to know who people think he is and not many people seem to know who he is and (G) . . . It is also a test of Peter's faith. (S)

Here we go with the reincarnation stuff again. (G)

It is a confession you know. (S)

[All the five translations were noted by the group with the identification of Jesus as the 'Christ of God'.]

Jesus is given a lot of different names. The NRSV says 'Messiah of God'. I think of Jesus as the Son of God who became the Son of Man. So God became flesh and that would account for the two different wordings about the same person. (S)

Sounds good to me. (C)

So this story is a simple explanation of how Peter understood Jesus to be the Messiah and it means the same as a story today as it did then. Some people don't identify Jesus properly and others do. (S)

The confusing bit is Jesus telling them not to tell anybody else. One minute he says to tell people and the next he says to tell no one. (G)

We already have agreed this was because Jesus didn't want people to follow him for the wrong reasons. (S)

But the confusing part is he has sent his disciples out before. We read that in the beginning of chapter 9 but now he tells them not to do the same. (G)

Maybe he just doesn't want to go before his time. (S)

Then Jesus goes on with his teaching about taking up your cross and following Jesus? Does this teaching mean anything particular today?

Verses 23 - 24.

You don't put yourself first - you better off poor rather than trying to secure all your wealth for your own. (G) . . . It's pretty confronting stuff, if you set out to do good it's going to be a pretty hard road, you'll have your cross to bear. (S) . . . It might be saying in verse 25 that even though you don't have much riches you don't have to worry - it is not the meaning to life. (S) . . . Actually the cross a lot of people have to bear in the Glebe is not having enough and this says bear this cross I will provide, don't look to the Bond's of the world - it's the quality of life that matters (G) . . . Don't lose the real you just for wealth - be the real you. (S)

What happens when we lose our very selves as it says in verse 25?

Well I think it means you a goner really, you've lost control completely and you caught in a maelstrom and you've lost it (S) . . . and a lot of people do this like Allan Bond and Skase - they are so busy weaving these webs of deception that they lose their own lives even while they are living (G) . . . Connell and Elliott are the same (S) . . . Well it's true when you think these people spend all their time accumulating power and wealth but when they die where has all the power gone it aint worth a crock of shit then (G) . . . you don't have to be dead to lose your soul you know. (C)

What do you reckon taking up your cross daily means?

Setting out each day and trying to do the best you can and thinking of others and giving it your best shot. (S)

Verse 26 means the same today as then -some people scoff at God and say they don't need him and ridicule him'. (G)

Why would people be ashamed of Jesus?

Because a lot of people thought he was a bit loopy didn't they and they thought he was crazy, and he was about to become a criminal for what he believed and that would be embarrassing for some people. They would not want to be associated with that and also ashamed to be around him and be arrested as well. (G)

I'm not sure what it means. (S)

Well if you are ashamed of Jesus then in the end times God will be ashamed of you - I think. (G)

Verse 27 - what's the Kingdom of God? Heaven? (G) . . . that's what you're always taught to believe? (S)

Does it show itself in any way on an earthly basis?

Yes - in the miracles that happen on a day to day basis in our lives is when we see the Kingdom of God happening here. (G)

I see it mostly as a heaven thing but what does it mean if it is heaven and the verse reads 'there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see heaven'? (S)

Well that's it. I was always taught in the Catholic church the Kingdom of God means heaven, but it seems out of place here. (G)

Maybe it's about the second coming? (S)

But if heaven is the Kingdom of God then this doesn't make sense. 'I tell you some of you here will not die until you see heaven'? (C)

This is a new idea for us to ponder. What could the various meanings be? Could it be the 'second coming'? (G)

[The group agreed to do some thinking about it between this group and later ones.]

It maybe this verse is a 'divine mystery' like others we have come across. (S)

This really gives me anxiety attacks (G) . . .I'm scared of it too (S) . . . I'm scared of all this second coming stuff and it scares me (G) . . . I'm terrified of it (S) . . . I am as devout as I can, but it still scares me as it comes down to your own self confidence and the question as to whether you're good enough or not and when the time comes am I going to be good enough (G) . . . I feel like I'm going to be running for cover (S) . . . It also relates to life today which is a learning process and the question is do we have enough time to learn all we need to so we are acceptable? (G)

So are you both saying the concept of the second coming is one you associate with fear?

Yes. (G&S)

Colin?

Not as much as them. (C)

It's something we have learnt and struggled with for a long time, especially in the idea of the end of the world and the second coming. Judgement and all that stuff. (G)

Well the question now becomes how do you picture God? As a God of love and grace and mercy or as a God of wrath and anger?

I was brought up in a Church of Christ school and it was always a God of wrath and anger (S) . . . and in my Catholic upbringing it was always that nobody goes to heaven, you go to purgatory and others have to pray this for you so by that theory if the second coming happens while we are still here then we won't make it to the Kingdom of God. (G)

We are not sure about the end of the world and judgement. I have read something by n John Henry Newman' who speaks of a refining process of what you have to go through before you can see God. And there is all the Old Testament stuff about God's anger. And we all grew up on a lot of that kind of stuff. (S)

In Luke have you come across this picture of God?

No not yet but I know it says somewhere 'depart from me you who are cursed'. So I have an idea about God cursing people. (S)

Do we have a full picture of what God will judge us for? Let's have a look at Matthew 25 : 31-46 as a judgement story containing the lines that have just been quoted, or at least similar lines.

[The group read the parable in Matthew audibly.]

Well Shirley and I know that we do kind things for others. But, well, we get this low self esteem and you don't want to be too cocky about this do you. I mean some of the things that Jesus comes out with - he gets a tad aggro and you think well hang on he's being a bit hard here. (G)

An positive example of caring for people in the concept of Matthew is breakfast for the kids in Glebe you know so we shouldn't despair. (G)

[The discussion then focussed on what repentance is. It was agreed that repentance and the invitation of Jesus to keep following every day was a way to move beyond the fear of God's judgement and wrath. This discussion then moved onto praying for Gwen's father who had died recently, and the notion of him being giving a second chance before God. A person had recently suggested a reason this was said to be impossible was the rich man and Lazarus story. It was also pointed out that the rich man sinned repeatedly however and that it is our choice to exclude God not the other way around. Gwen identified the fact that her father was a gipsy and had only the kind of belief that a gipsy has. Shirley identified two distinct images of God, one image taught to her by conservative evangelicals of a God of vengeance and anger and one she later learnt as an Anglo-Catholic, an image of God as love and mercy -'I still get glimpses of both'.]

Verses 28-36

Characters: Jesus, Peter, John and James.
Setting: On a mountain
Plot: Jesus changes his appearance and is seen talking to Elijah and Moses, two important prophets.

I wonder if it has anything to do with the fact that Jesus is assuring them that he will live again in case they are a bit depressed at the prospect of Jesus dying, although I don't see what Moses and Elijah were meant to indicate. (G)

Well they were great people in their own time and great men of faith so maybe they are showing what is at the end of the road? (S)

Why would they have any idea of putting up tents? (G)

Well if we read the story it says that when Peter had said this he did not know what he was saying - he was a bit of a half-wit. (S)

That's a bit tough. He had such a shock he was speaking without thinking and it was the first thing that came into his mind. (G)

But once Jesus has finished and the prophets disappear it's back to everyday life isn't it - they all come down the mountain. (S)

Does this story mean anything to us today ?

We should listen to what Jesus has to say because he is God's son. (G)

Verses 37 - 43

Characters: A son with evil spirits and the father and Jesus.
Setting: At the bottom of the mountain.
Plot: The story tells us the disciples of Jesus had tried to cast them out but couldn't. Does that mean they didn't have enough faith in their ability or the evil spirit was stronger than they were? (G)

They had already at the beginning of chapter 9 been given authority to do this but they couldn't. (S)

So Jesus gets angry with them and then tells the demon to go and it works. (S)

What does it mean today?

That if God's given us skills and abilities we should go out and use them for the best of others, (S) . . . have a go (C) . . . don't just sit back and say you can't do it - have a go (G) . . . it's God saying to us today don't leave everything to me get out and do it yourself. (S)

Verses 43 - 45

Any ideas?

It means Jesus is handed over to the hands and the power of men. (G)

He is trying to prepare them for what is ahead. (S)

And his disciples don't know what he is talking about and don't want to either. Otherwise they wouldn't be too afraid to ask. And then look at how they go on. The

boys have an argument about who is the best - it's like sibling rivalry (G) . . . all on their own little power trips, their own ego trips. And it's still the same today! You get it everywhere. You get it in the church. People on about who is the greatest all the time. (S)

In terms of what God thinks, the lesser you are, the greater you are in God's eyes. (G)

That's why he takes a little child, a kid, who in power terms doesn't rate a lot at all, (G) . . . and talks about welcoming the least among you, like a child is considered in many ways as having little value, but here Jesus takes the child and says this is greatness. (S)

Can we put it into any modern day example?

Children are still thought of in the same way today as they were when this text was written. (G)

So what is it in a nutshell that we think Jesus is saying about greatness?

Greatness may well be found in the most lowly and humble - you can't equate power, prestige or money with greatness. Greatness comes from another source in the eyes of God. (S)

Verses 49-50

Jesus says don't stop someone who is doing good. Interesting that the disciples have some cheek. They couldn't do it with the boy and now they are trying to stop someone doing it who doesn't fit with their denomination. (S)

They think they are so great, and yet they fail, so they try to stop the other fella. (G)

It's like envy jealousy, malice and pride you know, on the part of the disciples. (S)

In a way the disciples have become a little bit elitist themselves, but Jesus puts them back on their heels. (S)

It means today that this is a lesson to all the churches. Ha - thought I'd get in before you ask the question Andrew! So it means don't keep fighting each other saying any one doctrine or church body is doing more for or better than any other. They should all be working together as they all worship the same God, even if they get to their conclusions a different way. (G)

We had a local funeral service for two children killed in a house fire was given where the service was lead by a Catholic, Anglican and Baptist clergy together. It was a local example of churches working together. (C)

The next passage has some of the most difficult words in the bible you know. 'Leave the dead to bury the dead'. My goodness these are hard words. (S)

Well we are out of time so we will agree to look at them next week.

16/8/96

As we have a new member of the group let's remind ourselves of the 'rules' of the reading group. We will read the text in the English version we have. We will read

the text as story, and so we have a clear understanding of what the story is about ask ourselves some simple questions like who are the characters, what is the setting and then what is the plot of the story. And then the prime consideration in reading the text is what does it mean today, not what it might have meant back then in its historical setting, but what does it mean for us today? There is no right or wrong answer, only your own opinion, which we will check firstly with the group here and then if necessary with the wider opinions of others in the tradition of the church.

It's not anarchy! (G)

Not quite. (S)

Not yet! (C)

Luke 9: 51-56

Characters : Jesus, James, John, messengers and the Samaritans.

Setting : In a Samaritan village.
Plot : Jesus arrives in a Samaritan village on his way through to Jerusalem and when he gets there they tell him they don't want him, so John and James 'got very stroppy' and wanted to call down fire from heaven and then Jesus rebuked them - told them off and that they were wrong - and then went onto another village.

The story ends abruptly and we don't know what happens next, but the village was not destroyed. (G)

Why did the people not accept him? (C)

Well the only hint is in the text itself which is that he had set his face towards Jerusalem. (S)

Well there must have been racism alive and well back then as it is today, if they were so anti-Jewish they didn't want him there because he was going to Jerusalem. (S)

Could it be it was because he was going to be crucified? (C)

But it doesn't say that they knew that. I don't think you could paint such a spiritualised picture out of it. It seems to me to say he was going to Jerusalem and that's why they reject him. (S)

Yes it seems it's just because he is Jewish and the object of racism. (G)

So how do James and John react?

They were after the quick revenge. (S)

Calling down the fires - nuke 'em. (C)

But Jesus says that nuking them is not on. (G)

It's a striking parallel isn't it - nuclear weapons and fire down from heaven. (C)

Does it mean anything about the way we live our lives today?

Sure does especially for the lands today that are in war over racial issues from Africa to Ireland, but Jesus says this is not the way to deal with the problem. (G)

And it is the same on an individual basis. You can't respond spontaneously to harm others or plot it either. (S)

What are ways in which people don't receive us today?

Even if it's sitting at a table or sitting in a bus people don't sit with others they don't like the look of or who might come from another land or be little bit strange - even church people do this regularly. (S)

So if we are confronted with this kind of rejection and racism we should not retaliate but move on to another place. (G)

Another difficult ask! (S)

Verses 57-62

It's quite interesting that after a person has said to Jesus 'I will follow you wherever you go', which you think would be a good thing to say, Jesus then tells him that he will have no place to lay his head. (G)

And then he asks people to follow, who all say they have to do something first and he tells them off. (S)

This seems to be quite complicated. (G)

Well, these are all people who are possible followers of Jesus. (C)

Mine says the cost of following Jesus. (G)

Well what is the cost?

In the first place I think he was saying to the man, you don't know what you're in for. I don't have any home so following me is tough - don't make any fancy promises you can't keep or nor prepared to keep. (S)

Be sure you know what's in store for you before you set out. (C)

And what about the next one?

I don't know. That's too hard. I have not understood that for years. (S)

Well maybe it means if you want to follow me you have to put me before everything else, even burying a family member. (G)

Yes, but what are you supposed to do? This is what gets me. I can't leave a family member to bury themselves. (S)

In today's world if a family member dies it is unthinkable not to look after the funeral arrangements. It would be seen as irresponsible and disrespectful. (G)

In our context it is really offensive what Jesus suggests. (S)

And it contradicts love your father and mother. (G)

Could Jesus have been bluffing to test him? (C)

If you take it in a literal sense you'd leave him there to rot. (S)

The only way it would seem to make sense to me is that Jesus is saying leave the dead issues behind when you follow me. But the example is a bit off. (C)

I think we need more information on this. It just doesn't make sense to us today so we may need to find out what it might have meant when Jesus said it? (G)

That would be breaking our own rule you know. (S)

Well does it seem to need for us to do that?

I think so. (S)

We need to go away and look up any commentaries we can find or even seek an answer from others. (G)

I have just discovered that there was an additional verse noted at the bottom of my Bible which relates to the previous story we had been discussing. 'You do not now what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them'. This really does support what we concluded as a group. But why would such an important verse would be put at the bottom of the page? Maybe we need to get it out of the footnotes and back in the story. (S)

Well it is there because there are variations between different ancient texts that make up this Gospel.

Well it would make much clearer sense of the text if it was not in the footnotes. But at least that finishes it rather than leaving it up in the air'. (G)

Ok so let's get back to the text we were discussing. The next person who follows - what does Jesus say?

Well this one makes sense because it says if you take your eyes off the field you're plowing, or your hand off the plow, it will go all over the place and there will be a great mess, so once you're on the journey keep focussed. (G)

This one makes clear sense. (S)

And it's a farming image as well- for you plow a field so things can grow and that's what we are meant to be in following Jesus, making things grow in other people's lives. (G)

Luke 10: 1- 24

Characters: Jesus and seventy others.
Setting: On the way to Jerusalem.
Plot: Jesus sends out seventy followers ahead of him on his way to Jerusalem and gives them a set of instructions about what to take and what to do in each village they enter, very much like what the disciples had to do in the beginning of chapter 9 (G) . . . do the best you can with the ones you come up against. Be nice where you can to help them and partake of what ever they offer you, but if they don't want you move on - don't waste all your life messing about with them. (S)

No matter what we do in God's name then God's Spirit is with us so we can do everything and do some things we never thought we could do, and if you keep hitting a brick wall then move on. (G)

It's a positive reading compared to the judgmental stuff. (S)

[At this point in the discussion Gwen went back to a previous reading in chapter 9: 46-48, stating that was also a positive reading as Jesus included people who were children, so that meant one did not have to be learned or intellectual to understand what Jesus was teaching and that was for her a positive way to consider what she had read.]

What do you think the verses 19 -20 mean?

Well there is a church in the U.S. that takes this literally. and they have them in their church and they kiss the snakes as well. They do I saw it on television. I think they are crazy! (S)

I think it is figuratively speaking, otherwise it doesn't make sense! If I saw a funnel web I wouldn't go up and grab it. I'd hit it with the biggest shoe possible. (G)

So do we understand this as an example for us today?

I think it's like Psalm 91 - you don't need to be afraid - in that way it's an example. (S)

Maybe it's if danger comes to you I will be with or the Spirit will be with you so don't be afraid. (C)

Here it is in Psalm 91. The lion and so on - maybe they knew the Psalm and that Jesus was referring to it and it's obviously about God protecting people. (S)

The really good bit of this lot of verses is in verse 21 - God chooses to reveal things to the children and not to the wise and intelligent - just like he put a child in front of the disciples in the power thing - so it is the ordinary person like you and I that God reveals what it's all about to. (G)

Isn't there a big lesson to be learnt there? (S)

Mean the same today?

Oh yes! (S) . . . just because you're university educated or better than other people, if you sit down and listen long enough you may learn something. God doesn't just go into the highways and byways and say you've got an IQ of 190 so I pick you or you're very clever and I'll pick you to tell my stories to. No. He picks the children, the little ones. (G)

Is this how it is understood today?

No, the men in power, or the people, not only men, in power, still think that they know more than the common throng and aren't really interested to listen to what the everyday person has to say. (G)

This verse says what we are doing here is OK! (S)

Are you saying that this verse validates what we have been doing here in our readings?

Yes! Yes! [general affirmation]

So reading and understanding the Bible today doesn't have to be in the hands of the trained academic and theologians, everybody is invited to read as its meaning is revealed to everybody?

Yes! It's even stronger because it says it's hidden from the wise. That's why we are like the disciples in verses 23 & 24, as we can sit here and read the Bible and we have the privilege of understanding it - and that's a good thing - and it gives us encouragement as well. (G)

23/8/96

The reading group opened with Shirley telling us that she had followed up the 'mystery verses' in Luke 9: 59-60, by 'phoning John Pierce on the Sydney talk-back radio station 2GB and that he had said its meaning was best illustrated by the words of John Gladstone (British P.M. in 1800s).

It simply meant 'let bygones be bygones' as Gladstone said 'therefore I fervently entreat you to let the dead bury the dead, let bygones be bygones and cling not to any evil form of' . . something. I did not get the end of the sentence. The speech was made in 1834. But then again as Gwenny said that does not equate with the previous sentence, where he says first I have to go and bury my father'. Gwen you should ring him again to see if you could get something further. (S)

We should leave the problem at that get some further information. I'm happy to accept 'let bygones be bygones' but it doesn't quite make sense of the request to bury the father - you can let bygones be bygones after you have buried the dead, as well as before. (G)

He didn't think it was meant to be taken in a literal sense- he's a good Anglican and is pretty well schooled up on all things biblical and spiritual. (S)

Will the commentary be helpful? (G)

Possibly. It will attempt to say what it may have meant then, whereas we are saying what it means today.

Maybe you need both the experts and those of us reading today to make sense of it. (S)

Luke 10 : 25-36.

I like it and we all know it and the meaning is plain. This lawyer wanting to justify himself, asked Jesus who is my neighbour (G) . . . Why was he wanting to justify himself? (C)

He was an expert in the law, and he stood up to test Jesus, so he asked him what must he do to inherit eternal life and then said what was written in the law. What do you read there? And he answered 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.' (G)

So what does Jesus say?

He says your right. (S)

So what does that mean today?

I think it means exactly what it says. I can't see any great hidden meaning in this parable or the next passage on Martha and Mary - it means exactly as it is. (S)

And they are all linked aren't they - it's not just love of God, it's love of neighbour and self? (G)

[Everybody agreed]

I don't think there is anything further down that can be unearthed - it's straight forward. We can move on. (S)

Yes. (C)

What about the parable - let's tell the story here in the Glebe.

I don't know what you mean. (G)

Let's see if we can retell the parable here in our context using contemporary people and characters and see if it says anything new to us.

A combined group attempt commenced as follows:

A man was going from Annandale and was passing through the Glebe and fell into the hands of young hoods, out for a quick fix, and they took off his Reebox and his Nikes, beat the crap out of him, and took off leaving him half dead in a puddle of his own blood. And then along came a great big big member of the church hierarchy. He was going the same way too but he went over to the other side he crossed the road. And then came - I'm not sure what equates with a Levite, but it could have been one of our north shore friends or one of the eastern suburb snobs - ok someone from the more exclusive suburbs - a rich person from the other side of the tracks - a wealthy person visiting a restaurant in the Glebe - and he also comes to the place and passes him by on the other side. He crosses the road.

But then along comes a poor person, a person of no wealth and minimal needs of support. (G) . . . It doesn't say that though does it. Well he's not well liked though. Poor people were not Samaritans (S) . . . Well what would a Samaritan might have been? (G) . . . Well we know from the reading about the Samaritan village that the Jews and the Samaritans did not get on - but neither do the rich and poor in Glebe get on. (S) . . . In terms of the Samaritan it was definitely an ethnic thing. So, all right, an Aboriginal was walking past (G) But he's not an ethnic - he's a native of Australia isn't he? (C) Well all right maybe a Vietnamese, Arab, Fijian or a Tongan, or maybe even better a Muslim. (G) . . . let's agree on a Muslim (C) . . . ok, a Muslim was walking past and takes pity on this person. He didn't look to see what kind of person this was he took him home - fed him, cared for him and took care of his wounds. Hang on he didn't take him home, no he took him to the pub, but before that he poured on oil and wine, and the next day he took out some of his own money and gave it to the owner of the hotel and said looked after him and told him he would reimburse him for any further costs. And the end of the parable has the question which of these three, do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? And Jesus said: 'The Muslim who had mercy on the person bashed and robbed, go and do likewise'.

What does it mean?

Exactly what it says. If you see someone in need don't look at why they are in need, or what he is, don't worry about what they look like, don't ask any questions - if you have a way to help - don't put on any high and mighty attitudes, don't put yourselves first! If you see someone in need, you just pitch in and help - you just do it. God will take care of you if you are doing what is right. Just like Gwen assisting a family of five children last night. (S)

If the Anglican minister up the road is the one who goes to Jesus and asks him what must he do to inherit eternal life and Jesus says what is written in the law and the minister gets it right, why would Jesus use the example of an Aboriginal or a Muslim or a poor person to make the point?

Because they are the cast down, the marginalised people. (S)

Because they are the people who are put upon by society for one reason or another. Society doesn't like what they do - or the way they look. (G)

But why would Jesus use this example, this type of person as an example of mercy?

Because I believe Jesus was a real socialist - a Christian socialist - the first real Christian socialist - I believe he was. (S)

I think he's also saying you don't have to be rich and powerful to make a difference. (G)

When you say a Christian socialist what do you mean?

Well he empathised with the lowly and the poor and needy and the down at heel and the people who were the outcast of society. (S)

In effect he was himself. Wasn't born wealthy was he? (G)

But he could have moved in the best circles couldn't he? (S)

If he is the first Christian socialist, then what we are saying is this parable and the things that Jesus did had a political meaning?

I believe so, I really do. I'd probably get shot down in flames outside here or in the church for saying it but I believe it. (S)

I mean he's dealing with a lawyer here- they are the ones who go into politics aren't they? (G)

So we would say it is an amazing thing to have Jesus say a Muslim was the one who showed mercy. This would be very difficult for a good Sydney Anglican. It has real political implications doesn't it. (S)

With Christian socialism what do you think are the main things that identify it?

Well I believe it is man's humanity to man to use that old term. It's how we treat others who are less well off than our selves. It's giving everybody a fair go, being tolerant, helping people even if we don't understand them. Making sure that the people have the basics in life, like a house and an education and a doctor and enough to have food. Everybody having some kind of equal start. And when people come from different countries or backgrounds don't run from them. (S)

In terms of what you have just said does this say anything then about the Federal budget like? [The Federal budget had been tabled in Parliament the previous Tuesday evening by the (conservative) Liberal Government.]

I hated it. It's the opposite to this. (S)

It's kick them while they are down, not care for the victims. (G)

It's going to divide the country more than its been divided for some time. Now you have to have $26000 to get into a nursing home! (S)

There is also the landlord who is doubling rent for the elderly and trying to force them out. (C)

And we might be the next! (S)

It's very very likely that we will have to pay market rental and no one of us can afford to pay market rental, so those of us in public housing are targeted. (G)

And which section of the media seized on this more than any of the others? It was the gay press. They are going to fight like mad because there will be a lot of HIV and AIDS sufferers out on the street. (S)

It will take away medical help and pensions and they will try and dump everybody out in the boonies [countryside], but they can't do this to everybody. They have targeted Glebe, Woolloomooloo and Surry Hills, but they can't just say if you're willing to move to the western suburbs or Cabramatta you will qualify. (G)

The paper says we will be paying up to 75% of our pension on the rental. (S)

Well if I pay market value I will be paying my entire pension on rent. (G)

It's a political decision that runs totally contrary to the meaning of Jesus in the Parable because if we take this parable seriously then the Government cannot do what it has just done? That's why I have identified Jesus as the first Christian socialist! He is opposed to this and is on the side of the victim. I guess we will need to find a Samaritan that will help us! (S)

Verses 38 - 42

Characters: Mary Martha and Jesus [Shirley identified Lazarus as a character and immediately identified the mistake - we agreed it was very important to read the text closely]
Setting: Martha's house, in a certain village.
Plot: That Mary sits listening to everything that Jesus has to say while Martha is distracted with preparations for a bar-be-cue lunch and doing good domestic chores, and she comes to Jesus to have a little whinge and says that doesn't he care that her sister's sitting there doing nothing, at least that's what it looked like to her, and she's left to do all the work (G) . . . shouldn't Jesus tell Mary to help Martha instead of letting her sit there just twiddling her thumbs? (S) . . . and Jesus says no in a nutshell - that 'Martha, Martha' don't be worried and upset about what is not important. The one thing that is important is what Mary is doing and it will not be taken away from her, meaning - that she made the better choice - don't fossick about and fiddle around - I've got something to say - don't worry about cleaning the house while I've got something to say. Mary made the right choice to listen to what Jesus has to say. (G)

Has it got a modern meaning?

I think it says the same today as it said then. (S)

Take time out from your life to read the Bible and listen to what Jesus has to say. (G)

Don't be a slave to housework. Certainly not! (S)

Is Jesus saying something about Martha's assumed role?

Yes - and some women still have that role and even women who go out to work have the same role. (G)

Is Jesus saying anything to those women in the story?

Yes. Take time out of that role to read, listen - do theological study even - literally it's equally important for you to listen to what I'm saying as it is for the man of the house. (G)

And it is quite clear that Mary has made the right choice and Martha needs to be liberated from some things - 'get a life' as it says in the movies. (G)

I don't think he was being dismissive of Martha though. (S)

No you can tell from the way he says 'Martha, Martha'. (G)

She was a worthy woman, but I think he was saying get your priorities right, don't worry what people think of your house - do the other things in life that are important. And like I said before I think it says the same today as it said then. (S)

Chapter 11: 1-14

Let's commence with verses 1- 4.

See once again how different translations have the prayer. (S)

But they are not major differences. (G)

So Jesus is praying in a certain place with his disciples, and they ask him to teach them to pray as John had taught his disciples to pray. So John the Baptist had disciples following him and he taught them to pray. So too Jesus' disciples want the same thing. (S)

How does Jesus teach them to pray, and what do you think are the key elements of the prayer and what does it mean today. We have all said it a hundred times so what does it mean?

It means we should keep holy the name of God and never take it in vain, respect it, not to be taken for granted and not to be taken lightly. (G&S)

So it is a question of respect. (C)

Your Kingdom come, may your will be done, as it is in heaven. (G)

What does it say about what the Kingdom of God might be? On earth as it is in heaven? Does it say anything about how things should be on earth?

Well better. (S)

I always took it to mean we should live our lives here on earth in the manner to which we know God would want it to be lived. Be kind to others, respect to neighbours, show mercy - which may be a political act. Be the way God would want you to be. (G)

So we would agree God is as worried about what happens here on earth as he is about what happens in heaven?

Yes! [responded by everyone]

So the prayer is not all spiritualised - it's quite earthy as the next thing we get is very earthy.

Asking for our daily meals to be provided for us. So its saying please don't let us starve, knowing that we are human, forgive us for our sins, and also it is saying we need to forgive everyone who sins against us. (G)

This is one of the tallest asks in the whole Bible. I find it a very difficult thing in life to do to forgive - sometimes it takes a lifetime. (S)

For what you want the heavenly Father to do for you be willing to do that for your fellow man. (G)

This is a big ask as we are humans who have feelings of anger, hurt and despair. And then it says protect us from Satan in our lives, give us the strength to fight off those things which are evil and deliver us from evil. (G)

What are the temptations in the Glebe?

There are temptations everywhere. (S)

If we prayed this in this context lead us not into temptation what are we asking God to do?

Stay away from King's Court. (C) [King's Court is a local brothel]

I think one of the easiest ways to get lead into temptation for me is to retaliate to some of the old rotten stinkers who live around here. I could spit right into their eye - not turn the other cheek - that's a hard one. (S)

To be tempted here to lock yourself away and not have anything to do with anybody and isolate yourself. But the temptation to me is the pokies and I like to go out when I can and play the pokies it's my stress relief. (G)

Do you win?

Only when I need it! But this only happens when I have been a good little girl. (G)

John takes us to the club. (C)

I also think this prayer is a compact thing, and if I'm too tired to pray, if I can get this out, it covers the basics and that is important. (G)

What do verses 5 - 13 mean? What is the story about?

Characters: Friend of a friend and another friend, so there's three friends - one in bed - one who knocks and the one who is in need. (G)
Setting: In a house.
Plot: A friend goes to a friend's house at midnight, and knocks on the door and says a friend of mine has just arrived and I have nothing for him to eat, so lend me three loaves, but the person inside is already in bed and locked up and says don't bother me. 'I tell you though he will not get up but because of his persistence so if you want something keep on asking and it will be given to you.' (S)

So verses 9-13. Explain what this means? (G)

I like this bit. (C)

What it is saying is that if we pray to God and request things, I mean some people take this literally but I don't think we should, God will answer our prayers so therefore if some one comes to us in despair, help them in the same way God will answer our prayers. (G)

It's also saying hang in there - be persistent. (S)

But it also shows us that God wants the best for us as well. God won't send evil upon us. God doesn't give us things that harm us. (G)

[General agreement]

Then why are we afraid of God like the other day?

Well Satan gets in and causes these panic attacks. (G)

Well we have identified last week, or the week, before a picture of God that was a bit scary. We didn't like it, but here we have a totally different picture of God?

That's what we said to you last week. You get these contradictory things and some places where you go you're are only taught the bad snippets like the God of wrath and anger. But in other places you go, you are only taught the good and not the bad. (G)

Why do you think one would teach you one lot and one the other?

Keep you in line. Some organisations feel that if you instil fear you will get submission, so if you don't submit to what I am teaching you, this is what you are going to cop. So either be good and adhere to the ten commandments or the God of wrath will do this to you. Instead of saying - well now we know you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar - and so they say people will be more likely follow the teachings of Jesus if we say God is a God of love, and he cares for you no matter what, but try and abide by these rules and God will still love you. (G)

We have lot more about the God of wrath in the Old Testament than the New Testament. (S)

With the contradictions in the text - I mean what do you do with that?

I don't know or ever will know, except I think it is the God in the New Testament that I follow. (S)

I tend now to go more for the God of love, but still you know you are human and that you make mistakes and therefore your old teachings tend to slip back. (G)

What happens if you make a mistake and you pray for forgiveness? What happens? What does the text say?

Well it's like if you have good parents and you tell them you have done something wrong - they work out how to deal with it by understanding the mistake. I had one of my gipsy dreams this morning, that my father was sitting up there next to the ping pong table, and then he was sitting next to me and everyone could see him and then he put his arm around me and kissed me on the cheek - it was very cold - and said I came to thank you for praying for me. God has forgiven me and I am at peace in heaven and I'm with my parents and I'm with my mother and I wanted to say thankyou for your prayers, and that God hears all prayers and that your prayers are answered and then I started to cry. (G)

What do you think it means?

I'd like to think it's God way of letting me know he has heard the prayers I offered about my father and not to be concerned and that my prayers are being heard. It relates very much to this passage here, and that our prayers are heard, and answered even if the answer doesn't always manifest itself in the way we want. (G)

30/8/96

Luke 11 : 14-53

Verses 14 - 23

Characters: Jesus, a crowd, a mute demon.
Setting: Doesn't say.
Plot: Jesus defending himself against the accusation that he is the devil or Beelzebul. But the accusation is turned away by the argument of Jesus.

The meaning is simple. United we stand divided we fall. (S)

Verses 21-22 are simply saying what it says. It's saying don't become too complacent or too secure there will always be someone stronger than you? (G) . . . You're never invincible so get your strength from God (S) . . . But it is really saying God is stronger than Satan? (G)

Where is Beelzebul today ?

He's everywhere - you look at crimes, look at drugs, look at evil substances and things, its a very clear manifestation of evil around us. (S)

Verses 24-26

The group agreed it would be better to bypass this passage.

But what does it mean?

Nothing good. (G)

If evil gets a hold on you it will get even more evil to have a go. (S)

Maybe it's if you really fight evil it will gather more strength to have a go at you so you need God's strength - but there's nothing like that in the text. (G)

Doesn't make any sense - even what I said before, because it starts off when an unclean spirit leaves, not getting a toe hold, so what I said doesn't make sense. (S)

I think it might be if you get rid of evil it will try and attack you even harder? (C)

Maybe it wanders through places without water because it is an image of a demon in a dry barren land. (S)

Verses 27-28

Well he seems to be a bit grumpy again doesn't he - I mean he's rebuking her again (S)

Well not rebuking her he's really saying that's very nice to say that about my mother, but blessed are those even more who hear the word of God and do it. (G)

Maybe he's putting himself down by saying it's nice to say that but even more are those who believe in God and do something about it. (C)

Verses 29-32

Characters: Jonah, queen of the south, Son of Man, the Ninevites and Solomon.
Setting: Among the crowds
Plot : Well the crowds are told they are an evil generation because they want a sign, but they don't recognise it is the Son of Man who is with them. (G)

Who is Jonas - that's what my Bible says Jonas? (S)

Isn't it Jonah and it's the Jonah and the whale story that he's talking about? (G)

So who is the queen of the south? (S)

The queen of Sheba. (C)

That's not necessarily so is it Andrew? (S)

Well let's see if we can make sense out of what we have in front of us.

I think that two groups of people would condemn the current generation because in their time they had Jonah or the wisdom of Solomon and repented, but the current generation can not identify it has a greater sign than that, in the person of Jesus. (S)

So Jonah came to Ninevah and the people repented, and now Jesus has come to his current generation and it's up to the people to repent?(G)

But they are not doing that which is why the others will rise up and condemn them for it. (S)

So what does it mean today?

[Silence]

Do I take it that it does not really mean anything to you today?

Well I think so. We don't have Jonah, Solomon or Jesus with us today, except by way of reading about Jesus. (S)

We have the Holy Spirit. (G)

There is nothing about that in here. (C)

I don't find any immediate meaning for me in the Glebe. (S)

[general consensus]

Verses 33-36

Well you can't take it in a literal sense can you about the eyes? (G)

And in old cultures they said the eye is the light of the soul, and didn't they in some primitive cultures burn the eyes out as a way of dealing with evil? And some of the eyes were covered. (G)

What does it mean?

It tells you fair and square. Don't hide your light under a bushel. If you've got any good points don't be afraid to show them to the world. (S)

Even if your values don't match up with the society in which you live, don't lock yourself away, show people by the way you live what your values are. (G)

If you skip the eye bit it makes sense. (C)

I know people who are blind but whose whole body is full of energy and life and light so this teaching doesn't make sense today. It must have meant something different then. (S)

Or they had a different understanding of the way an eye functions. (G)

Look what it says in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. 'The light of the body is the eye : therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body is also full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness'. Now in comparison to the NRSV version of the same verse 'Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your body is full of light, but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness'. (S)

The Good News says 'Your eyes are like a lamp for the body, when your eyes are sound, your whole body is full of light; but when your eyes are no good, your whole body will be in darkness'. (G)

It seems to me the old King's James is much more simple and makes it understandable. (S)

Why is that?

Because the idea of the body being crook because of evil, makes much more sense than if it is about an unhealthy eye. (S)

Verses 37 - 53

Characters: Pharisees, Jesus and lawyers.
Setting: At a Pharisee's house for a meal (again).
Plot: Jesus really gets stuck into the Pharisees and the scribes and the lawyers because the Pharisee has a go at him for not washing his hands before a meal. (S)

He tells them to do a bit of 'inside' housekeeping. (G)

It's like we read before when he tells them the outside show doesn't mean anything if they have greed and wickedness inside as their real motive. (S)

And there's nothing difficult about applying this today. Just look at the people in power in the 1980's and their outward display of goodness, while all the time they were greedy and corrupt in what they did. (G)

And not just in the world - it 's the same in the church. (S)

So we can say to the modern day Pharisees the same thing but in our language - woe to you people who think you can buy your way to heaven with your money and things that don't cost you any effort (S) . . . and woe to you who brag about giving so much money to the church - you've given a tenth of your earnings to the church and yet you neglect the people of your own community. You see someone in need but you walk on the other side of the road, but yet you brag that you've done all this work for the church but your not showing Christian life style outside of the church. (G).

Yes that's right - no emotional or physical effort to give anything to anyone - no justice or love of God, which is also love of your neighbour shown in the real world. (S)

And then it goes on woe to you who go to church and love to be seen and put yourselves in the bishop's chair and out the front to be seen (S) . . . they are putting themselves above everybody else and don't care about others (G) . . . hang on I haven't finished - its that place not just up the front but in some places people sit right in front of the pulpit hoping to be seen (S) . . . a seat of honour could also be a place in the church council (G) . . . yes the hierarchy, the elitist (S) . . . who think they should have power. (G)

So it might say woe to you church council members - you want to be elitist and have the power and to be seen wherever you go (G) . . . in fact some people used to pay for their own pews. (S)

And these people will not talk to the little people ever. (C)

But verse 44 is a mystery. Does it mean they are like unmarked graves? Not as well-known as they think and the way God looks at things they don't have a name (G) . . . Yes like an empty upturned glass they leave no trace at all. (S)

This expert in the law should have kept his mouth shut because as soon as he said it was a bit insulting Jesus let them have it as well. (G)

Like then so today! The lawyers, the experts in the law are out there charging hundreds of thousands in fees and little people have no access to the law. (G)

They want to get maximum benefit for the most money with as little work as possible. (G)

It's like they make the law which puts great burdens on the poor and then don't lift a finger to help. (S)

Verses 47-51

It's a paragraph which is difficult. It seems like the sins of the sons carrying on the sins of the fathers who killed the prophets, and the sons are building on this by approving it to go on and the tradition of the prophets to be kept down. They knew their forefathers had done it and they kept it up themselves or at least approved of it. (G)

Maybe a modern parallel would be Jesus telling us that we were the same in the way we have treated Aboriginal people. (S)

But we didn't know before that long ago. (G)

But we are doing that now. (S)

Well it could go for any atrocity or bad thing we let go and don't try to stop. Like drug running here in the Glebe. (G)

Well it means that if you know something is wrong or somebody has or is doing wrong then you must do something about it. (S)

Sometimes you try all the avenues to take on the wrong but it seems impossible. (G)

Does this say anything about that kind of situation?

Yes! Try, try and try again - there's got to be something you can do - that's part of what this is saying. (C)

Verse 52 in today's terms is about not letting people think things through for themselves. You know you've got the hierarchy telling people what to think, not like this kind of group. They'd turn their noses up at us. We're not good enough to interpret the Bible! So it says don't take away the key of knowledge from us and don't assume we are idiots. (G)

Or it might say woe to you academics, eh? Woe to you academics who take away the key of knowledge from us. You want to control and you only get half into it yourself (S) . . . by watering down what it says (G) . . . and you stop us from trying to say something about the Bible ourselves. (S).

Jesus keeps telling off people at dinner doesn't he, and it doesn't seem to matter who it is. (C)

That's why it ends the way it does with them trying to have a go. (G)

We have read eleven chapters of Luke now. What kind of picture of Jesus are do you have so far from our reading?

Well he's not going to take any nonsense that's for sure and he doesn't suffer fools gladly or those who think they're better than everyone else. He's quite willing to get out there and fight for the underdog and put these people in their places. (G)

He's a hard task master but he always offers hope, and he never puts anyone beyond redemption I don't think. I think there's a chance for everyone to make good. (S)

He gives you an out. He tells you what your doing wrong but he gives you an opportunity to have another go to change and he fights for the people who aren't strong enough to fight for themselves - the downtrodden and set upon - he'll fight for them . (G)

Didn't I tell you last week - he was the first socialist. (S)

He's also very earthy and he approves of people using their minds. (G)

But he's a bit of an activist - he wants action. (S)

He doesn't keep people down and says your too stupid to listen. (C)

You know Andrew our aim is to read the whole of the gospel, but I'm not sure we can do it unless we meet for a whole day as we are running out of time. (G)

Everyone happy to do that ?

Yes indeed. I never knew the gospel of Luke was so interesting. (S)

20/9/96

[The group was joined today by Harvey (H), a member of the Glebe Estate Community Church and a resident of Petersham.]

Luke 12

Verses 13 - 21

Characters: Someone in the crowd; Jesus; and in the parable there is a rich man and God.
Setting: Outside.
Plot: A man in the crowd wants his brother to split an inheritance and asks Jesus to tell his brother to do so and Jesus tells him he is not a judge on these matters and warns about being greedy and goes on to tell the parable about a rich man who had a good crop and thought he would build bigger and bigger barns and then eat drink and be merry. But God says what does it all mean, this wealth and possessions, and God told him he had no later date to enjoy them! (G)

I think it's fairly straight forward until we get over the page to verse 49, in that the Lord is teaching the man not to put so much store on worldly possessions and all they can acquire in this world because it won't do them any good at the end of the day. It won't avail them anything at all and not to place so much emphasis on the things that one would worry about and acquire like the food and clothes in verses 22-34. It's reassuring to me that God will look after our needs so we don't have to go running after them. (S)

It seems to be saying that we can be distracted from the real things in life by all of the things we go after. (H)

It also says that God will look after you, even though the larder may be empty God will provide. (G)

Is verse 15 the key to understanding all that follows?

Yes. [General agreement]

It's about not being greedy and it's about having what you need, which is what God wants, but it really says we are not to be greedy. (S)

It means what it means as it is written. (G)

It's always nice to have good things but we need to be happy with what we have. (H)

Is verse 15 well taken in our society today?

No. Everything we get today is buy, buy, buy. It's consumerism gone mad and this is what the Lord is advising us against. This teaching stands in direct contrast to all the advertising of the day. (S)

What about verses 32 -34 ?

Well the purses that do not wear out means hang onto the good things in life because they are the ones that will stand you in good stead and last. (S)

And it also means something about faith doesn't it? You should hold onto that as well. Don't become all consumed in acquiring today's worldly goods to get all that you want. But it's not popular teaching today. You only have to look at what the kids do today - they want it and they want it straight away. (G)

We all want more than we have, especially when you have so little, but that doesn't stop you being thankful for what you have. We have breakfast but to a person without food in other parts of the world it's a banquet. (S)

If it was all this simple we would have got through it a long time ago. (G)

Verses 35 - 40

This is straight forward as well it's about being prepared. (S)

Live your life as though Jesus is returning tomorrow. (G)

It's like seize the day kind of stuff. (S)

Verses 41-48

Well it's teaching about possessions again. (H)

I don't get that. (G)

It's teaching about someone who abuses his position. He is given the responsibility to look after all the possessions of the master and he goes off the rails and abuses this position. (S)

That's like people in the church who do the same thing - they take advantage of it - their position in the church. (G)

This happens in all parts of public life - people taking advantage of their position and abusing it. (H)

And look what's in store for them if they do - it's very violent - they will be cut up into pieces too. If you don't know you're doing it, you'll get a beating, and if you do know you're doing it, a bigger beating! So whatever you have been given responsibility for, a lot will be demanded. Or maybe it's if you get a lot of things you need to give them away. (G)

It doesn't say that. It's about being responsible when you have a position of trust so it is especially relevant teaching today for people in power wherever they are but especially in the church. (S)

It's a warning to people in power or in positions of trust. (H)

It's severe warning. (S)

I'm not sure that God will cut people to pieces though. (G)

Well, it's not good imagery and we'd say it differently today. But the message is the same then as now. If you're a person in a position of trust and power God is going to call you to account if you have taken advantage of the position and been deliberately bad towards others. (S)

I don't think we can avoid the fact God will punish those people. (H)

Verses 49-56

This is now very difficult. (S)

Jesus is not very happy. (G)

My account says he's stressed. (NRSV) (G)

Mine says distressed. (GNB) (H)

And then it goes on to say do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? I would have thought so! (G)

This doesn't compare to what Jesus said and did in that passage on the Samaritan village where Jesus rebukes the disciples for wanting to bring fire down to the earth. (G)

This is where I can't work this out because it is a direct contrast to what he says about coming not to destroy life but to save it and this is where we have difficulty. (S)

So are we saying again that this is a contradiction to what has gone before?

Well yes, because he has been teaching about loving others and sharing and doing good and saving life, and now he's saying something quite different. (G)

He's definitely under stress because he says he hasn't come to bring peace on the earth but division and that can't be right as it stands in so much contrast to what he has already been said. (S)

But Jesus did bring division between people who did become Christians and those who didn't become Christians, so I think it might allude to that. It's talking about what is actually happening. Maybe he's saying it as a warning about what could happen if people became Christian. (H)

That's stretching it isn't it? (G)

Well it does go on a bit, because when I became a Christian it does pit members of a family against others, or in my case a Catholic marrying a Baptist. (G)

Well that seems to be what happened to Jesus and his followers. (H)

Maybe what it means to us today is that when a lot of people become Christians today they think now I have become Christian everything will just be perfect, but sometimes it means you face all kinds of opposition and difficulty. (G)

It's not all smooth sailing. (S)

It might not be a spooky as it sounds - maybe Harvey's putting a whole new perspective upon it. (S)

I only got that from the last bit about division. (H)

Well maybe it's that and not the idea of divine retribution which he brings which makes no sense. (S)

I don't get verse 49 but. (S)

Maybe in our language Jesus is saying he's come to stick a fire under all the complacent people who hang around without being committed to anything. (G)

Do we expect Jesus to be stressed?

Absolutely. (G)

He's not there as God only, he's human like the rest of us and so of-course he's stressed. He's in human form. (G)

God probably gets stressed today when people who follow him turn away. Maybe the fire is about testing? (H)

This might all be figurative rather than literal. (S)

Verses 54 - 56

Characters : The crowd and Jesus.
Setting : Still with the crowds.
Plot: Jesus says you can interpret the weather, but don't know what is going on in the present time. (H)

What does it mean to you today?

Well they know how to interpret the elements but they don't know how to interpret what he's trying to tell them. (G)

In the words of Oscar Wild 'today everybody knows the price of everything and the value of nothing'. (S)

You're always quoting somebody because you read so much! (C)

Well I think it is referring to the fact that God was there amongst them and they didn't recognise it. (H)

That's what it meant then what does it mean today ?

It's about knowing when Jesus will come again. (H)

We are seeing signs all around us and the strife and the wars and we should be looking on these as a portent of things to come so I better smarten up my act. (G)

Well on a less scary note look at what is happening in your life and see where God is in it, and be thankful. (G)

It also might mean simply being aware of the world in which we live. (S)

Well it could apply to something like what is happening to public housing at the moment, and how you should understand it and speak out against it and not just think it doesn't matter. (G)

It's like you look at what is happening around you and seize the day as we said before and do something. (S)

I was still thinking that in Jesus time it was only a little later on Jerusalem was wiped out and nobody expected it, so maybe it's a bit the same look at what you need to do around you and be aware of things. (H)

Verses 57- 59

Why do they make the two separate? We should have verse 57 after 56 about judging what is right and interpreting the signs of the times. It seems they go together, so we don't need there to be a paragraph setting. (S)

Well yes, but it seems to me this has a spiritual meaning. It's about being judged by God and everybody will be judged and be punished by God. (H)

But it seems to say if you have adversaries try to make peace and don't try to go out and make enemies. (G)

Let's re-read the story or example.

[The group re-read the story.]

Why would Jesus tell us this story and what does it mean?

By the time you get to the judge it's too late and you're going to get punished, so work it out before hand. Like if we can sort out our problems before God it will be better than waiting for the judgement. (G)

Where in here that we have read today does it say anything about God's judgement?

Well I think the whole thing is spiritual. Or at least that's what I'm reading into it but it seems to me all Scripture has a spiritual meaning. (H)

Well it means in its literal context, if you do the crime you gonna do the time, so get to the person you have wronged and patch things up, settle out of court before it gets to the magistrate, but you could also spiritualise it as well I suppose. (G)

Maybe it's about living in harmony with each other. (S)

I think it has a spiritual meaning and it's about finding our peace with God. (H)

If you done it plead guilty. I'll have to reserve my decision though. (S)

Well I suppose it is good to look at what it means in the present time I guess. (H)

One of the things we have never figured out is leave the dead to bury the dead. (S)

Well I think it's about leaving the things behind in your life that you need to leave in the past. (H)

So you mean you got to leave the dead issues behind? (S)

Like don't flog a dead horse. (G)

That's a much better stab at the meaning. (S)

It's like don't hold onto your anger, let it go, do you think? (G)

27/9/96

Luke 13

[The group opened with discussion about why some translations had 'headings' and other did not. Some headings it was noted made you expect something to be in the text or story which were not always there. For example the heading 'repent or perish' in chapter 13: 1-5.]

Verses 1-5

Characters: The Galileans, Pilate, eighteen killed by the tower of Siloam.
Setting: Still seems to be talking to the crowd. (G)
Plot: Jesus is with the crowd and some tell him about an atrocity committed by Pilate where some Galileans seem to have been killed and their blood mixed with the blood of what it was they were sacrificing and in response Jesus asks if they think the Galileans who died suffered because they were worse sinners than others and then he says no, and adds a warning that if the people listening do not repent then they may find they suffer and perish as the Galileans did. He goes on and tells about another tragedy where eighteen people die as they are squashed by a tower and he asks the same question again - are they worst offenders than the others living in Jerusalem and says no, and adds a warning unless you repent you'll go the same way! (S)

What does it mean?

I don't know and it worries me! (S)

The first part is in the 'It don't make much sense part'. Maybe the Galileans had started sacrificing humans and Pilate had come in to stop it? (G)

But there is nothing in the story about the Galileans killing anybody? (C)

Well what were they sacrificing? (G)

Well it must have been goats and other animals. (C)

Do we know who Pilate was?

Pontius Pilate. (S)

And he was a ruler and he killed some Jews with their sacrifices. (G)

It's pretty gross. (C)

So what exactly does he ask then?

Did they suffer because they were bad people? (G)

No - it doesn't seem so from the text. (S)

They hadn't done anything wrong - it's just like the persecution of any other race - the oppressors just go at random and kill people. (G)

And the other example?

Eighteen people out for a stroll and a tower falls on them and boom they're gone. (C)

They were in the wrong place at the wrong time (G) . . . and they weren't doing any mischief were they? (S)

So then Jesus says do you think they were big sinners and the answer is?

No. Then why were they punished? (S)

But they are not punished. It's an accident. They weren't being punished, but I guess in those days they figured everything was a sign and they have taken this as a sign of punishment when it wasn't. (G)

What does it mean today?

Anything we suffer in life is not a punishment from God. Everyone is treated the same. Some of us think that if we do wrong we will be punished by God because when we grow up we learn that our parents will punish us when we do wrong but this passage says that's not the way it is to be, or that's not the way God acts. (G)

Are you happy with that?

I guess I have to be - its been something I have worried about for a long time. Why do people suffer? (S)

Especially when you see little children suffering. (G)

Exactly innocent children. (S)

That's the big question. Why do innocent people, who haven't done anything to anybody else, suffer? (G)

What do you think the answer to this is - why do people suffer?

I think everybody goes through their own sufferings, and some of us want to blame God for it and sometimes we allow ourselves to suffer or get melancholy about what life is doing to us and in this way you can make your own suffering, and so you can either suffer with the bad things or look for the good things. (G)

Well are we happy to say this passage concludes that people don't suffer like this because they are sinners, but it's a fact of life, but it is not what God wants?

Yes. [General agreement]

Verses 6 - 9

Characters: A man and his foreman and his fig-tree
Setting: In a vineyard
Plot: Well it seems to me to be saying no-one is beyond redemption. That there's still hope for them like that barren fig tree, even though it hasn't borne any fruit yet there's a chance it might if it's given some attention a bit of TLC, then it might just come good (G) . . .don't give it up as a lost cause yet . (S)

So it's about a second chance?

Yes, that there is always hope. (G)

What does then mean for us today?

That we're not to be written off or other people either. (S)

So does this parable make sense?

Yes. [general agreement]

It's about giving someone a second chance and nurturing them. (S)

Verses 10-17

Characters: Jesus, woman with a bad back, the leader of the synagogue, people in the synagogue.
Setting: One of the synagogues on the Sabbath
Plot: There is a woman with a bad back and she couldn't straighten up by the looks of things, and Jesus saw her and singles her out and Jesus heals her and it doesn't make some people happy (G) . . . all the hierarchy get angry (S) . . . indignant is the ruler of the synagogue and he's going on about not working on the Sabbath so he says 'you have six days to do all that including healing but not on the Sabbath', so tough biscuits, if you're sick on a Sunday don't go to a doctor (G) . . . but the Lord soon sets them right and says if they have an ox or a donkey don't they lead it to water so it doesn't die of thirst on the Sabbath and then he says even more shouldn't this woman - he calls her a daughter of Abraham - be set free from bondage on the Sabbath (S) . . . and all the opponents were

humiliated and the crowd rejoiced at the wonderful things that were being done. (G)

What does it mean today?

There's work on the Sabbath and there's work on the Sabbath! (G)

Yeah. (S)

I mean you don't sit at home saying you can't cook or clean or do anything so that's stupid (G) . . . that's taking it to the extreme. If it's worthwhile, do it no matter what day it is. (S)

So the leader of the synagogue is taking it to extremes?

Yes - it's really stupid - like the Seventh Day Adventists they won't lift a finger on their Sabbath, but I say if it's worth doing do it. (S)

So what's worth doing?

Lots of things, especially what Jesus does. Like even worship on a Sunday requires work - that's how foolish this is - the legalism of it. (G)

Legalisms - that's it. (S)

If you take the letter of the law in a literal sense then you're being a twit. (G)

So what is Jesus's law?

If it's something good that needs to be done then attend to it. (S)

Assess the situation. You know I wouldn't work on a Sunday if it interfered with me going to church. (G)

Is this really talking about any kind of paid work ?

I think it is self serving work that Jesus doesn't want us to do on the Sabbath, but I struggled with that as if there is a job that is on then I wouldn't say no as I need the extra dollars being quite poor. (S)

What kind of work is Jesus accused of doing?

Healing. (S)

So does it relate to the idea we have today about working on the Sabbath?

Well not in exactly the same way. But it does associate with people like who live on the land and when I grew up I was fouled up with the Churches of Christ and they said my grandparents who lived on the land shouldn't milk their cows but of course they have to do this and I think some churches are still like that. (S)

There are a lot of literals out there. (G)

They are the fundamentalists - but I haven't struck one for a while as I have stayed away from them. (S)

So does Jesus have anything to say to them?

Hypocrites. (G)

It's still the same as it was then today, and I think you'd find a lot of them in mid-west America. (S)

It's a pretty good straight forward story (S) . . . it's a nice one. (G)

Luke 13 :18-19

Now we have a couple of parables starting with this one. What is it about?

It's about comparing the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. (S)

And what happens to the seed?

It's planted in the garden and it grows up very huge and birds perch in its branches and everybody's happy which means the word has been planted and its grown and if it was me I'd compare the birds to little children coming and finding shelter in this word and they go on and spread it like birds do with seeds and so it goes on and on. (G)

So this is what the Kingdom of God is like?

Yes even if it starts small it can grow and grow and encourage others to come to it. (S)

Is it a safe place?

Oh yes, I think so don't you? (S)

And it's also compared to the yeast in verses 20-21 (G) . . . oh yes, you leave it overnight and when you find it in the morning it has risen to many times its original size. (S)

You'd need to know how to make bread to understand this wouldn't you?

Yes, and you'd need to know you'd have had to work on the bread and kneaded it for some time before you left it overnight. When you mix it with the flour you need to work it in to make it rise. (G)

That's the difference between leavened and unleavened bread. The unleavened is the flat stuff. So this means the same thing. You work on something and it expands. (G)

Like yeast once it takes off it really does take off. (S)

How does it relate to the narrow door? (G) . . . in fact why couldn't the narrow door bit come first before we get to this difficult bit? (G)

Well that heading to verses 22 -30 gives us a pre-supposition doesn't it. It may be not as bad as it sounds. So what does happen?

Jesus goes on from one village to the next teaching and he was still on his way to Jerusalem, and they ask him 'are only a few people going to be saved?' and he says you make the effort to enter because it's only a narrow door and there will be many who don't get in and only those who put a lot of work into it will get in. Only

the hardest workers will make it. Those that sit around saying I'll deal with this later or just before I die won't get in. (G)

It's a bit Noah's arky. (S)

What about when the owner of the house has got up and shut the door and you're knocking on it and he says I don't know where you come from, and you say we ate and drank with you and he says go away. What does that mean?

Well it's those who didn't try hard enough. (S)

That's scary - I don't like that one. (G)

Well it was like that with Noah too - he had to batten down the hatches. (S)

But he tried real hard to get them to come and when they didn't respond and tried to get in he said you've left your run too late. (C)

Maybe that's what it means don't leave your run too late (G) . . . try just that little bit harder (S) . . .nobody's perfect but try to live your life as best you can and no matter what happens don't lose faith or go sliding down the slippery slide because you just never know. (G)

Then there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?

Oh yeah, because they didn't get in. (G & L)

What about verse 29 & 30 ? People will come from east and west? Some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last.

Well that's the good bit. That means even if you were the least of people, you could have been a street bum, an alcoholic, but your faith could have been huge (G) . . . and some of the high-rollers, Bishops and past Popes, leaders of the church who think they are so grand (S) . . . and people in the corporate world, everybody who thinks they above everybody else and can buy their place any where they go (G) . . . yes they go to the back of the queue and those who have had it rough and had all kinds of things flung at them in life they get in first. (S)

So the people coming from east and west - is that a lot of people?

Yes - it's saying that there will be Jews, there will be Muslims, there will be Baptist, Catholics, Anglicans from all the corners of the earth - Buddhist from the East - the Dalia Lama and people from Western society - it's a cross cultural thing and they'll all in it together (G) . . . I believe there are some good Muslims who must get in (S) . . . they believe in God but not in Jesus in the same ways we do as Jesus does not come up in their text (G) . . . I had talks to Muslims about this when I was in North Africa and they seem sound apart from this one thing they don't believe in Jesus. (S)

It is a contentious issue in the church all this isn't it?

Yes, but I don't think it should be. (S)

As I've said before things are quite good here in the Glebe in the interactions between the churches, but in a lot of other areas you don't find the Catholic church working with the Anglicans or the Baptist or the Salvation Army for the good of the community. (G)

I don't think this passage is as hard as we thought. (S)

Not if you take the bit out in the middle. Don't get despondent. Try harder and you'll get in. (G)

So what happens next? We have some Pharisees come to Jesus and what do they say to him?

Get out (G) . . . because why? Because King Herod wants to kill him. (G) . . . they weren't saying get out in a bad way. (C)

Who was King Herod? (C)

He was King of Judea. (G)

OK, so the Pharisees come to Jesus and says get out because Herod wants to kill you - is that unusual ?

Well yes it is. They are doing him a favour aren't they? (S) . . . they've been rotten to him up to this stage (G) . . . I wonder about this? (S) . . . maybe they've had a change of heart (G) . . . I don't know? (S) . . . maybe they think if they warn him, or maybe, gee I have a suspicious mind, they think that if Herod is thinking of getting Jesus and finds him in their territory they'll cop it as well, so they say get out of here. (G).

Why would Herod want to kill Jesus?

The story doesn't tell us. (G)

The same Herod had killed John the Baptist. Must have been a threat to him. (S)

Jesus does what then ?

He calls Herod a fox which shows he has a sense of humour. (S)

And that he realises the nature of this man and that he is cunning and that he's not scared of him (C) . . . I can't get there straight away - I have other business to complete as it says in the Jerusalem Bible (S) . . . so maybe he's saying I know it's near to the end but I have other things to do first, so maybe he's giving himself three days at the end to complete all he has to do, a few more demons to drive out, some more people to heal, and until I have reached my goal, don't pester me. (G)

What's that mean no prophet can go outside Jerusalem? (S)

Anybody know ?

No I'm asking you (S) . . . and I don't have an oracle to ask (G) . . . maybe it's the people of Jerusalem were harder on the prophets than anybody else. (G)

Do we know what Jerusalem was?

A city (S) . . . their home, but they didn't all come from Jerusalem did they? (G)

Maybe the people of Jerusalem killed a lot of prophets, but outside of Jerusalem they were considered in a higher light. (S)

More respected perhaps outside - they were without honour - it's like it's easier to go to another land and preach the gospel than it is in your own home town. (G)

So what do we think verses 34-35 mean? What kind of image does this give you of Jesus?

He's maternal (G) . . . yes he's very soft here (S) . . . maternal - I know it should be paternal, but its not it's very maternal - it's what a mother would do (G) . . . yes it's real soft and soppy here. He must have pleaded with them to come around. They were hard of heart weren't they (S) . . . yes, he's pleaded with them and its been heartbreaking for him to know they will reject him. It would be like a Jesus trying to get some young heroin addicts off the street of Kings Cross and to try and get them off heroin and they fight him every inch of the way and just go back to the streets, and then they might die of an overdose and Jesus is grieving because he hasn't got any more time to give - that's the same kind of thing I think this is about here. (G)

11/10/96

Luke 16.

Verses 1-13.

Characters in parable: A rich man and a manager; characters in text : Jesus and the disciples.
Setting: On the rich man's property.
Plot: The first part I understood but the second part I did not. But basically the rich man is accusing the manager of wasting his possessions, so basically that he's not doing his job properly. so he'll have to go. The manager has worked out that when he goes he doesn't have the tools to do any other job and he'll get a bad reputation if he gets kicked out of this one, so he decides to be dishonest with the master he's still got and he decides to do good things for the debtors so that will get him a good reputation and people will be good to him when he no longer has a job. (G)

So what does he actually do?

He cuts part of their debt away so the people who actually owe him so much, owe him less. (G)

So what did the master do?

Well he commended him for being dishonest (S) . . . but that's why he's getting rid of him (G) . . . I can't work this one out (C) . . . unless he thought he had a bit of initiative and a bit of drive so he talked his way out of it (S) . . . it says shrewd is what he is (G) . . . astuteness is what he says in the Jerusalem Bible. (S)

So then Jesus makes a response at the end of the parable in verse 9 - what does it mean?

Well before we can look at that we need to look at verse 8, the second bit ' for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light' (G) . . . does that mean the enlightened ones? (S) . . . oh I don't know. (C)

If you go on to verse 10 'whoever is faithful in a very little will be faithful also in much' and the bit that comes after that - well that's all right, but it's the bit that comes before that I can't fathom. (S)

It's verse 9 that's the worry. (G)

We need to read verses 11, 12 and 13 again. (S)

[These verses were re-read slowly and audibly by the group.]

Well the last bit is very clear, the God and mammon bit (S) . . . verse 13 on itself we can understand. (G)

How do you understand it?

Well, its simple either you serve God or mammon (S) . . . if you devote all your time to the mighty dollar then you have no time for God or to look out for other people's needs, you have no time for worship, so in pursuing one you have no time for the other. (G)

Does this relate in any way to our modern world?

Yes, we are always being told to serve money! (S)

If you're devoted to getting more and more all the time you're serving the wrong person. (S)

But if you're a high flying businessman, but you give what you have of your time and money to others and you go to worship and pray, then I think it is manageable to be that way, especially if God is the basis of your life - but you have got to have your priorities right. (G)

But this is what we were talking about yesterday. It's so much easier for a high flying business-man like Kerry Paker or Rupert Murdoch to ladle out the millions, because that doesn't hurt them. But when it comes to giving of their time and their self, now that's a different matter. It's easier if your wealthy to give your money than it is to give of your time and of your self. (S)

You don't have to do anything much if you just give money away. (G)

Yeah, they can shrug it off and say, look I have given money away to this that and the other, but when it comes to giving of themselves it's a different thing. (S)

It's more like Cliff Richard who is very rich but gives of his time to work with underprivileged children. (G)

He puts his money and himself to good use. I think Dick Smith is a good man as well - he gives of time effort and money. (S)

Well if we go back to the parable what do we want to say about that?

Well it's contradictory, basically it's the way it's worded. It's saying that the manager used his initiative but in doing that he was dishonest, but he made sure his future was ok. But he did it in a dishonest way and the way I read it, its saying that's all right to do it like that. But we know dishonesty, 'thou shalt not lie', is wrong. So it is contradictory. (G)

Well it gives me the impression that he is possessed of animal cunning, not of a vicious nature, I don't think he was a really bad guy at all. I think he's just acting on animal instinct, self preservation because he wants a warm place to live, something to eat and a few friends, and he's too weak to dig ditches, so it's self preservation really. (S)

Maybe what it's saying is while you are here use your time wisely? But I still can't work it out totally. (G)

Maybe its help yourself while you can - you see this guy does that (S) . . . but he was using worldly wealth to gain friends, but it wasn't his worldly wealth to use in the first place and yet (G) . . . that's a bit like capitalism using some-one else's money to make money - that's what the banks do. But I'm the last person to say that's a good thing. Capitalism and the way the banks operate should be condemned (S) . . . so look at it - it's in the too hard basket really. (G)

So do you feel we have some understanding what the parable is about?

No (C) . . . I'm with Colin - I don't really understand it! We all know dishonesty is wrong so it just doesn't make sense. (S)

Verses 14 - 18

Characters: The Pharisees; Jesus;
Setting: Same place as last time
Plot: There are three, not two bits here. The first is a discussion with Jesus and the Pharisees and the second bit is on the Law of Moses and the third bit is straight teaching on divorce and remarriage. (G)

That's three bits! (S)

How are the Pharisees characterised?

As lovers of money, maybe that relates to what we have just read? They don't say anything but Jesus tells them, you are the ones who try to justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows who you really are, for what is highly valued amongst men is regarded by God as an abomination (G) . . . well that's fair enough to isn't it (S) . . . but it's still contradictory to the other parable. (G)

Well what is today in our world prized by human beings?

Wealth, worldly possessions, money and prestige, power and position, all of these. (S)

So Jesus is talking about that in the same light?

Yes I think so and he's having a go at it. (S)

And you are taught when you're at school that you have to have a job and it is your civic duty to own a car, own a house, get married have two point two kids and that you have to have a good job, and it's drummed into our kid's heads that you must be a doctor or lawyer or successful and that just being a ditch digger or garbage collector that you have to be a brainless moron to do that. But I think that's wrong. (G)

Well its told us earlier in Luke that the first shall be last and the last shall be first, you know go up higher to the lowly ones, come up higher if you're down. (S)

That's what I was saying the other night. Children should be taught that it doesn't matter what their occupation is whenever they get older whatever they do, they should be proud of. (G)

So basically do you think that teaching is consistent with everything you have heard so far in the main themes of Luke?

Yes. [General agreement]

Then Jesus says what?

Verses 16 - 18.

Now this has got me baffled. (S)

Don't make no sense to me. (C)

And then verse 18 doesn't seem to make any sense in this day and age as many people say I haven't cheated on my wife (G) . . .well we get onto that in a minute. (S)

[The group re-read verses 16 - 17.]

My version says everyone is trying to enter it by force (JB), while the GNB said 'forcefully', while the NRSV has a footnote which says 'everyone is strongly urged to enter it.' (S)

That's better - that at least makes more sense. So it's saying since John, which I assume is John the Baptist, that the good news is being preached and people are strongly urged to enter the kingdom of God. (G)

But the next bit doesn't make too much sense for us today as we don't really know what a stroke of the law means. (S)

Well maybe it's saying that the laws of God are ensconced and so firmly set that it would be easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for there to be a change in those laws which I take to be the ten commandments. (G)

Well that makes a bit more sense. (C)

So they're the basic laws which we are to live by. (G)

Today?

Yes. (G)

Well you may just be right. (S)

Hang on - I've just found a footnote in my Jerusalem Bible that says about the last parable, that the master praised the manager or steward, not for his dishonesty but for his cunning and shrewdness. (S)

So that means we can be cunning and shrewd? (G) [laughter]

I think it might be saying you can be shrewd in your dealings with people but don't rip them off. (G)

Maybe wise as serpents and gentle as doves? (C)

Maybe it's like a street cunning - like being street wise in Glebe. (S)

You're not hurting anybody but you've got street cunning to preserve yourself, to achieve what you have to achieve. Maybe a modern day example would be you know you're going to get the sack so you ring your boss and tell him you have got sick and take a sickie but then you put on your best clothes and go to the CES and look for and get another job. You haven't hurt them or anybody else and you managed to survive. You might be getting paid for a days work as sick leave but you have taken it to look after your own back. (G)

Isn't it dishonest to take a day's sick leave when your not sick? (C) [general laughter]

Ok, I think we need to leave it there! (S)

Verse 18.

Now this is a worry and has plagued me for years. (S)

I have tried to live by the ten commandments all my life. (C)

But this is not talking about the ten commandments - it's talking about divorce! (S)

Yes, but I have always believed what this says. People always go around saying adultery is sleeping with another person's husband or wife - while today people say it is so common for people to be divorced that it's all right for them to re-marry, but I don't think it is. (G)

Really? Well I have stayed single for thirty years now since my divorce and I have never allowed myself to become so close to anybody as to have to make the decision. But I don't look at it as adultery, but in the Catholic church you can't get re-married. (S)

I think so many people today have too slack an attitude about marriage and see divorce as being so easy that this type of teaching would help people take the whole concept of marriage a little more seriously. (G)

But what about people who are Christians and who get married in good faith but discover that they have not made the right choice. I know a very young couple who at the advice of their church fellowship got married very young and now in their mid-twenties they are getting a divorce. What do you think about their futures when they get divorced?

Well there may be mitigating circumstances in some cases I guess. If it was not their decision and they were forced upon them maybe they can have friends, and company and I'm not saying they should be celibate for the rest of their lives, I just don't think they should go into matrimony. So I'm saying that there might be mitigating circumstances. (G)

Are you saying they can't get married but can have a sexual relationship with someone? (S)

Well it's very hard for me because I never got married in the first place to the fella I'm living with. (G)

Well I'm speaking from personal experience. I was married for a lot of years and when I got divorced after the initial pain and angst of it all, and you think you can resurface and get back on track a bit and live again, you get to the stage where you might have a little dalliance with somebody and it might even reach the point where you have to decide whether or not if this person is the right person to spend the rest of your life with, and this has spooked me since the day I got divorced this passage. It was the year Whitlam got elected as Prime Minister, 23 years since I got divorced and you know this passage spooked me so much that I will not allow me to get into a position where I would have to make the choice. I don't know it might be superstition. But I'm frightened enough of it that I'm not willing to go against the teaching of it. But like Gwenny said I think you might go down then track that she said if you really love some one. (S).

See there's all sorts of relationships and it's like everything else we have done so far. These things were written way back a long time ago and obviously there was divorce then. Maybe what it's saying in this day and age is, as I said, what works for me is to take this teaching as it is - I wouldn't go out with a married man (G) . . . don't you mean a divorced man? (C) . . . yes, a widower but not a divorced man. But maybe what it's saying today is if you have got people who took the advice of others and got married and they did it and did it before they matured enough, and now they have to go their own way and are now at the age when they can make a decision then that would be hard. (G)

Why do we think Jesus might have said this?

I don't know? (S)

Because maybe back then there was a bit of taking things for granted and maybe that the message of this is don't take things for granted. (G)

It seems very very stern a law to me to make the innocent party sometimes suffer in this way for the rest of their lives, through something the other person has done. It seems to punish the innocent party - I hate this law, but I live by it. (S)

It makes both people equally guilty and that may not be the case. (G)

And it forces people into having a sexual relationship if they feel they cannot get married. (S)

Well lets put it into twentieth century today. I say there are very few relationships or marriages that have not been consummated long and hard before they have got down the isle, and so I mean it's already, a lot all live together before they get married. (G)

I wonder if the concept of being married then was the same as it is today? (C)

Nope. Today you can have de-facto marriages by law and I'm sure this was not the case then, so it's very different. (G)

I don't think we are ever going to resolve this one. (S)

I don't either. (C)

Thanks, Colly! (S) [laughter]

I think it is probably one of the most difficult teachings to understand and has affected so many people brought up in the Catholic faith. (S)

And it's only one verse too. (G)

Well my parents never divorced or went with another, but because she was a Catholic she never divorced him, but they didn't live together in marriage! (G)

It's very interesting because I don't know where this puts me, but my ex-husband has gone through two other marriages since me. Now how would that place me co-habitating with him when he comes down at Christmas? In this teaching am I married to him or what? (S)

Well he was your husband first, so I think you're safe there. (G)

Verses 19 - 31.

Characters: The rich man dressed in fine purple and linen; the poor man called Lazarus; Abraham.
Setting: On earth and in heaven.
Plot: The rich man ignores Lazarus so when they go to heaven their situation is reversed. Lazarus is taken by the angels to Abraham, but the rich person is taken to hell, except he can see Lazarus the person he has walked past all this time and not even given a scrap of food to. Now he's up in heaven and obviously now his sores have gone and he feels so much better, so Lazarus is doing really well but the rich man is in agony. So the agony that the poor man suffered on earth, the rich man is suffering in hell. (G)

Lazarus was a very sick and poor person with sores all over him. (S)

What does the story mean today?

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Like don't expect to treat others badly here and then have God treat you differently when you pass on. (G)

Who is Lazarus in Glebe?

The woman who keeps coming to my place and wants me to talk with her. She's on methadone and her teeth are rotting out of her head but she comes to the door and wants a chat or to use the 'phone and wants to get something. Maybe that's telling me not to tell her to go away so it means don't turn them away. (G)

I see Lazarus's all over the Glebe. On the streets, going through the bins, and some of these characters around the Glebe I don't know who they are, but they are the real Lazarus's(S)

And it could also be people like Ray who is schizophrenic and others who have mental disability (G) . . . and it's the poor neglected people (S) . . . the down at heel (C) . . . the real underprivileged. (S)

What then do we think this story Jesus has told might mean then today?

Don't walk past them! Do the best you can to help all you can. (G)

And it means the same thing outside the Glebe. All those rich high fliers in the Sunday papers, they have a responsibility as well. (S)

And people like my brother, a blue collar worker, but well enough off to help others, but who wouldn't think of it. Normal everyday family people who could be helping the Lazarus's of this world. (G)

Yes it's the people who are snugly encased in their little cocoons who become isolated from the real world and their credo is I'm not doing any harm to anybody so I will do nothing. (S)

So are you saying it is a warning to us all about being aware of the needs of those around us?

Yes. [General agreement]

Chapter 17

This is direct teaching of Jesus so it's easy to see he is saying don't corrupt anyone. I don't think he's speaking literally here, as if you'll be thrown out to sea with a mill-stone tied around your neck, but he's just giving a pretty severe warning if you're going to lead people astray. (S)

And it says watch the way you raise your children and the way you teach children or in any way you have contact with children and don't influence them in any bad way or to do bad. (G)

Where did you get that? (C)

Well where it says one of these 'little ones'. (G)

I don't necessarily think that means kids. Every now and then Jesus gets nice and soppy and describes people in nice terms (S) . . . well I think it means everybody but it may mean especially children or also children. I see a lot of it, you know, these adult cowards who don't have the guts to do it themselves, so they get the kids to steal for them and get them to do wrong - so it is don't do it for anybody but in our context especially children. (G)

Verses 3 - 4

What do we think these verses mean?

Well we expect God to forgive us no matter what we do, but quite often we are not that lenient and then it goes on and in our case we have someone who constantly does us wrong and we get to a point when we say that's it I have had enough I can do no more! (G)

Well let's read what it says.

If your brother or sister does something wrong reprove him. But if he or she is sorry then forgive them, which is interesting as I don't recall that coming up at any other stage when we have read about forgiveness, but here Jesus stipulates it not once but twice - you need to be sorry. (S)

And then it goes on to say if he sins against you, but comes back seven times and repents or says sorry then you must forgive him, (G).

Is this good teaching for us today?

Yes. [General agreement]

I think it is important that there is the emphasis upon saying sorry. (G)

Verses 5 - 6

Oh, yes I carry this around with me! (G)

What does it mean?

If you have faith as big as a mustard seed you can move mountains. Meaning God can't increase our faith, but what faith we have, we can do wonders with it. And not to expect the Lord to increase it, but we can increase it in ourselves, and as time goes on faith will increase - mine does. (G)

What about the example given - how do we read that?

Well a mustard seed is very minute - I know as I just finished using one (G) . . . we use them a lot (S) . . . so minuscule you have to find one to pick one up (G) . . . tiny wee little things (S) . . . at least he didn't say celery seeds. Anyway what he is saying is that one of these little things can lift a mulberry tree which is huge, so

what it's saying is if we want to change things - if we see an injustice being done - if we have faith we should not sit back and say I'm only one person I can't do it! We should have faith, roll up our sleaves, and get on with dealing with the injustice. We can do it. (G)

Verses 7 - 10

Oh yuk, can we skip this? (G)

Now who are the characters in it?

Oh, he's not going to let us skip it! (S)

Well let's see if we can make sense of it for us today?

Characters: The slave, the master.
Setting : On a farm
Plot: Well the slave is out plowing the field all day while the rich person sits inside reading the newspaper all day and when the slaves finish, instead of saying sit down and have a meal with me, you tell the servant to clean himself up and prepare a meal for you (G) . . . yeah it's making an underclass society here isn't it, not even being grateful for what the servant has done (S) . . . and the servant has done all he's been told (G) . . . maybe its about a sense of duty. (G)

This is another contradiction I think. This seems anything but socialist to me. It seems to me to be an underclass here. (S)

Could it be he's having another go at the disciples as they were the last ones to say anything. He seems to be a tough task master if it is directed to them. No thanks, just you're only doing what you should be doing. (G)

Does it say anything to you today?

Not to me. (S)

It seems from the master's point of view it's saying me first, you second. (G)

I can only see it as a two-teared society there. (S)

Do you think it's saying give credit for something that happens to God rather than taking that credit for yourself? It's only what God's given me to do. But that's a bit far fetched. (G)

It certainly is. (C)

We should leave it there! (S)

Verses 11 - 19

Characters: Jesus, ten lepers.
Setting: A village between the region of Samaria and Galilee, on the way to Jerusalem.
Plot: The ten men who have leprosy meet Jesus and stand at a distance and call out to him 'have mercy upon us and so Jesus heals them and says 'go and show yourselves to the priests', but only one comes back to thank him and it is a Samaritan - gee Samaritans play a big part in his life (G) . . . they did and they seem to be a pretty good bunch for the most part (S) . . . much better than the Pharisees (G) . . . and only one came back to thank Jesus - so what happened to the others? Seems nobody came back to say thanks except this foreigner. There's a lesson to be learnt there (S) . . . and Jesus responds and says go your faith has made you well. (G)

Well what does it mean to you today?

It means we should be very thankful for what we have (G) . . . and sometimes it's the outsiders who are the grateful ones and the ingrates are us (S) . . . as you have said before it's sometimes the people who look like they have nothing that may have ten times more thanks in them than the haughty, and it goes with what I said before - be thankful. So often it's the unexpected person who gives thanks. So we should be thankful with what we have and not ask for more. (G)

Where does it say that? (S)

No, no it doesn't say that, I'm just putting my point of view onto it. (G) [laughter]

Verses 20 -21

[The verses were re-read.]

What picture does this give you of the Kingdom of God?

I don't know about this one - I don't know. It says somewhere that you don't know when it is coming and this says here it is amongst you. (S)

Obviously it's not heaven like we said before, so I think what it's saying is that the Kingdom of God is within us. (G)

Is the Kingdom of God the place where God reigns ?

Well that would mean wherever there are a group of Christians the Kingdom is there. Or maybe it's when the Holy Spirit comes into you. (G)

I think we have to say it is where people who are Christians are to be found then there shall be the Kingdom, even though that does not often appear to be the case. (S)

Oh my goodness, look we have arrived at these verses which are crazy. I don't want to discuss them. Any way it is rather strange for this to be talking about any type of second coming when Jesus hadn't gone away the first time yet. (G)

I think rather than be obsessed by it we will know when it comes with a blinding flash. (S) . . . maybe it's teaching about patience (C) . . . but you have to be on the alert all the time (S) . . . can we leave this in the too hard basket and come back to it if we have time? (G) [all agreed]

Chapter 18

Verses 1 - 8

Major characters: The judge and a widow, and God.
Setting: A court room.
Plot: It's about a woman seeking justice, coming back time and time again to get justice, and she's coming back to a judge who has no belief in God or respect for anyone, but her persistence pays off for her in the end because she gets what she seeks. She gets it not because she is entitled to it, but because the judge wants to get her off his back (G) . . . And Jesus says if this unjust judge will eventually grant justice then how much more quickly will God do it. (S)

What does it mean today?

Hang in there again - there's a lot of emphasis put on this isn't there. (S)

How is she portrayed?

Well she is persistent if nothing else (S) . . . and she displays a lot of faith doesn't she (G) . . . or is it courage or something else, like persistence (S) . . . I don't mean faith in the religious sense, I mean at least she kept worrying away at it. (G)

Does it have anything to say about justice or the lack of justice today?

I think the main issue of injustice is the one of housing and we must keep being persistent in that the new government is attacking public housing. That's a real life modern day parallel, and we have to have the faith to believe it can and will change if we keep doing it - calling for justice. And if they change it will be for the good of themselves as they think of the power of the voters. So like the judge politicians will eventually decide something for justice if we nag them enough, but they do it for their own interests. (G)

Verses 9 - 14

Characters : The self righteous Pharisee and the tax collector (it was noted one version said publican!) in the story itself.
Setting : In the temple
Plot: Well they'd come to the temple these two men to pray and their attitudes were very different (S) . . . so the Pharisee prays this prayer, that he's not like the other people who he calls thieves, adulterers, rogues or 'this tax-collector' (G) . . . nice bloke (C) . . . but the tax-collector knows he's a sinner and so prays for forgiveness and one goes home justified and the other one doesn't, and it's not the Pharisee! (G)

I like the humble tax-collector or publican, as he is humble, and simple folks like us can identify with him. It's what Luke has been saying over and over - whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (S) . . . the first will be last and the last will be first (G) . . . and it doesn't matter to God what people think of you. If they think you're a low-life it doesn't matter. People think people who live in public housing are low-lives but it doesn't matter to God. In God's eyes you're a great person. (G)

Verses 15 - 17

This is a fantastic story - I love it! Because you've got your mums and dads wanting to bring their children to Jesus and for Jesus to touch their children and then you have the disciples saying who do you think you are, you're the nuisance factor and go away and Jesus says no, no, no - 'suffer the little children to come to me and do not stop them for the Kingdom of God belongs to them'! (G) . . . it's rather nice isn't it! (S) . . . and then he says whoever will not accept the Kingdom like a little child will never get into it. (G)

What does that mean?

Think as a child, think innocent thoughts, don't deliberately set out to hurt people, be humble like a child, say you're sorry when you do something wrong, and think with love and innocence and don't fear God - we are God's children. We are to think of him as a loving father or parent. (G)

Receiving the Kingdom in humility and trust - trust is the key word. (S)

Verses 18 -30

Characters: A certain ruler - who was very rich, Jesus, Peter.
Setting: Doesn't say.
Plot: A certain ruler asks Jesus what must he do to inherit eternal life and Jesus says why call me good, no-one is good but God alone, and - here we go again - the ten commandments - he says he's followed the ten commandments and then Jesus says you lack one thing - sell all you own and give the money to the poor and then come follow me and you have treasure in heaven. This fella was still weighed down by the burden of wealth. (G)

How does the rich ruler respond?

He was very sad as he was a man of great wealth and he didn't want to give up his great wealth and Jesus says how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God and gives the well-known example of the camel going through the eye of a needle. (G)

What does that mean?

Well the more wealth they have the more they won't want to get rid of it. (G)

You don't see too much of this around the Glebe today do you? (S)

No - not a lot of rich folks here. (C)

I think it's another question of faith as well because if you give away all your wealth you have to have some faith that God will look after you and rich folks are

to used to trusting in their own wealth to turn that on to God. It doesn't say it directly but it could be assumed from the story. (G)

Does verse 27 mean that some rich people might be saved?

Yes (G) . . . with God it is possible. (S)

What does it mean to us?

With God all things are possible. (G)

See then Peter says we have left all to follow you, and he must have left a home as he was married as we know from Jesus healing his mother in law way back at the beginning, and Jesus' response can be taken the same way today. Like in the religious orders people leave all, but they swear by it, saying it's the best life they can have here. (S)

Verse 30 says if you do all those things it will be good right here and now not just when you die! (G) . . . yes in this age (S) . . . you will get blessings, so it's not all bare foot and dross (G) . . . and the good things of today don't have to be riches - there are much better things, little blessings along the way (S) . . . there are a lot of people out there who think the more they suffer in this age the better it will be later. But that is not what this says at all. (G)

Verses 31 - 34

This is about Jesus telling what will happen to him, and the disciples don't get it. (G)

Who will Jesus be handed over to?

The Gentiles - the non-Jews. (S)

I thought it was the Jews who crucified Jesus - that's what we have always been told (S) . . . yes, but Pilate got him as well and he was a Gentile. (G)

The poor old disciples seem to have it hidden from them and they don't get very good press here (G) . . . is it any wonder the stupid sods. (S) [laughter]

Verses 35 - 43

Characters: The disciples telling everybody to go away, a blind beggar and Jesus.
Setting: Approaching Jericho.
Plot: I already said it's those disciples again telling everybody to go away, and they had just done it before that with the little children, and they'd done it before that when they were trying to get the person into the house, so they just keep on doing it. (G) . . . and they did it with the guy casting out demons (S) . . . so the blind man is asking for help and they tell him to be quiet (G) . . . but he shouted all the louder, all he had to offer was his voice (S) . . . and despite the disciples, Jesus stops again and asks him what he wants, and the blind man says heal me, and so Jesus does and Jesus says it again, 'your faith has healed you' (G) . . . he didn't ask for wealth or anything else he just wanted his sight back and then he follows Jesus. He wasn't an ingrate was he. (S) . . . no indeed (G) . . . and the people who were telling the blind man off they began to praise God too. (S)

It really teaches us that we shouldn't judge who is acceptable to come to church or who is worthy in the sight of God doesn't it? (G)

[The remainder of the tape was too distorted to be transcribed. The group agreed to reconvene at a future time to complete reading the entire gospel. This was achieved in 1997, but not recorded for the purposes of this study.]

MILITARY CHAPLAINS READING GROUP
VICTORIA BARRACKS, SYDNEY

Reader (1): Baptist Chaplain Division. 2 Lieutenant - Colonel.
Reader (2): Uniting Church Chaplain Division. 4 Colonel
Reader (3): Churches of Christ Chaplain Division. 2 Major
Reader (4): Presbyterian Chaplain Division. 2 Major

Meeting 1 : Feb. 13th 1996

Introduction to concept of the reading group, clarification of questions of confidentiality and identification of the context by the chaplains.

Meeting 2 : 22nd Feb., 1996

Let me summarise what we discussed and identified last time we met.

This approach to reading the text accepts that our contexts influence our reading of the text.

So instead of denying that we are shaped, for example, by our race, culture, gender, class, theological training, and instead of denying that these factors influence our readings of the Bible, a commitment to this way of reading the text is that we acknowledge and recognise the forces and factors that have shaped us and formed us and how this affects our reading of the text.

As military chaplains a summary description of what shapes the context in which you work you have identified as follows:

* national security
* command and control
* an environment full of tradition
* military chaplaincy - the intersection of two very conservative institutions - the military and the church (hence the possibility of the development of a ' military religion')
* administrative procedures dominate much of what is done
* there is always the issue of authority
* male dominated society with an emerging female non-combat presence in the force (10%), where strength and power are the major issues.
* maleness and mateship : the discourse of an 'esprit de corp' male dependency in time of war
* a culture of denominational distinction at the RACS level but amongst the soldier a lack of this distinction
* training for war is what we do in the army : we develop a closeness in this training even to the point of watching each other crap
* an environment with an emphasis upon good planning in order to cover all contingencies and win the battle.

The questions you identified you would be bringing to the reading process were:

1. Chaplaincy is a mobile job - how does this impact upon how we do our job?
2. How do we change the army?
3. How do chaplains operate in a spiritual role in the Army - are we more than military religious social workers?

4. What is God doing in this context? What is our ministry in this context? Am I in touch with myself and soldiers adequately to minister?
5. Denominationalism in the army - is there a place for it?
6. How do we be in this place but not be shaped by it?
7. Does the text tell us who we are?
8. Is my assumed spirituality (vertical) effective in my military presence (horizontal)?
9. What does the text say to me as a 'God-person' or reveal to me about ministry in this context? That is what is the intersection between 'God-person' and ministry?

With the limited time left let's commence with Luke 4 : 1 -13.

[The reading group suggested that the process of identifying the characters, setting and plot was not always necessary as they were familiar with most of the text. However we identified Jesus and the devil as the major characters and the setting was the desert and the plot was 'temptation'.]

What does this story mean for us today?

Jesus overcomes temptations. We don't and we need to take some of this seriously, like fasting. Jesus overcomes temptation because he is quiet before God. Fasting is also a way to be before God. (4)

Jesus calls on his spiritual resources to overcome the devil and so should we. (2)

And he answers the devil by quoting Scripture, so this means that Scripture has ultimate authority. (4)

Does it have anything to say to us in our contemporary setting?

It raises the issue of, if I'm to be genuine in my ministry, how do I face and encounter my own demons? (2)

For me it's all about the abuse of power. Jesus had the capacity to abuse power. See the last temptation, it's about declaring yourself invincible - a major power trip. This reminds me that everywhere I go in the army the plea is to be reasonable, to fit in with the bureaucracy to make it work - that what it is about? (1)

I'm not sure what it means directly to me, as I have never been hungry and tempted as a result of it. But perhaps it relates to power here and the use of it which is a major issue in the army. Maybe there are the economic temptations there as well. Since the restructuring of the chaplaincy we all now compete for rank and rank has got pay changes, so this very structure facilitates the temptation to fit in with the power and get ahead. (1)

To do what you believe God wants you to do is what you have to do. (4)

But getting back to the structures, we have here a set of temptations and they are about power and then we are in a violent context so here we sit in the midst of two key military factors of life. Power and violence. We are chaplains so we are skating in the environment of demons or if you like, we have out tents pitched in the middle of a field of potential evil. So we have temptation around us and need to work out our response. (2)

Maybe that's what the next sessions will be about, as we have run out of time. So we meet again next week, same time. (1)

Meeting 3 : February 29th, 1996

Luke 4.

Verses 14-30.

[As soon as the reading concluded discussion commenced, initiated by the readers.]

It's about self-identification. (1)

Not necessarily - it doesn't indicate in the text that Jesus fulfils it. (2)

Jesus has the major role. The people do not speak. Jesus says 'doubtless' but I can't see how it is so. Jesus does all the talking and says doubtless you will ask me to do what I did down the road in Capernaum but I will tell you why I can't do it. (1)

But the people do talk - they say 'isn't this Joseph's son' - which at least says 'isn't this the boy we knew'? It's a put down - tall poppy stuff. (2)

They know this guy - they see some difference in this guy and are amazed at what they see and don't have a history of his gracious words because they 'wondered at it'. Notice the NIV changes 'gracious' words to 'eloquent' words. (1)

All he has done is read Isaiah and said that this is today come true, and they call it 'gracious' words? (2)

Must be the way he read it. Must have been read in a way that was unusual for them. (3)

Well it may have been the eloquence with which the words were delivered. It must have been a powerful rendition - maybe something we could learn from in terms of preaching. (4)

Rather than how it was said, could we focus on what it was that Jesus said?

It's from Isaiah 51 - I am a prophet or I am special. There is another difference in the translation. The NRSV says to 'bring' and the GNB to 'preach'. The latter's verbal, the other implies much more activity. (3)

What does it mean today?

The statement the 'Spirit of the Lord is upon me', is straightforward and doesn't hide anything. It's a powerful statement. (4)

The guy's either crackers or he's in touch with God in a special way. There are a thousand preachers today who want to say God told me - it's a cover all statement. (2)

That's why it might be about the way in which he presented the words. So many preachers have a go at saying this is the word of the Lord but few actually get this response. (4)

It's claiming the mandate of God. That's what Paul Keating says. It's an expression of the authority of God. (1)

Anointed me means made him special - to preach good news to poor people, prisoners, blind, oppressed. To jump back to Jesus's culture the people all named are people in one way or another who were marginalised - that is they are people who didn't earn a salary or wage. (3)

I guess for us today the same groups of people are marginalised - so this must mean that Jesus is especially concerned for them. (2)

Yes, but I look at that and in my life as a person I don't see many of those people. Soldiers aren't poor. They may be stupid, but not poor. They have enough money but if they are poor it's because they are stupid. I rarely visit someone in prison, that is literal prison, not using the word figuratively. (1)

That's people put in prison by justice - not an unjust thing- soldiers can expect justice in the army, due process. I'm not sure I take 'blind' literally either. It may mean more than that. In the military I guess you could say there is some oppression. (2)

I wouldn't say a lot. (3)

I mean there is not a lot of oppression. (1)

Then you don't see a lot of private soldiers? (2)

My task divorces me from too much direct contact so I rarely get a soldier coming to see me about some oppressive thing in the military system or being denied a right or being abused. I personally don't get this involvement, so when I look at that, if Jesus is claiming this text personally as how he saw his ministry which seems to come under the general heading of the acceptable year of the Lord, that is this is the content of the acceptable year of the Lord, what he is on about, then I have very little opportunity in a direct personal sense of contact with those kind of people that Jesus saw as needing something happening in the acceptable year of the Lord. I tend now to mix more with officers now. (1)

I may not have specific contact with the exact categories of people talked about in the text, but I did just see a single mother who is struggling to cope with life and the care of the child and her responsibilities, who herself had an abused childhood. They are not these specific cases but they are people in distress. (2)

But that's different to being oppressed. In a sense I wonder is she oppressed or just distressed. (1)

But who in our culture is oppressed? (3)

Aboriginal persons. (2)

Oh no they're not! Rubbish! What Aboriginal living in Sydney is oppressed? (3)

Just happened to have heard my brother talking about Aboriginals in general - many miles from here - one hundred miles from here living in oppression. (2)

But even if we just talk about the Aboriginal population they are only 5% of the population or less. (1)

So they may be a minority of oppressed people. (2)

Lots of people are disadvantaged but not many people are oppressed. (3)

Where I live in St Peters, a suburb right in the new flight path to the airport, we did not have any choice in the matter and just had to accept a huge increase in noise and discomfort when the politicians in power made a decision about fight paths. Its affected property prices and some people have been living in their houses for a long time. It was a whole process of disillusionment for this inner city community. It tore them apart and destroyed their social fabric. (2)

And the compensation is disgusting and there is the injustice of the arbitrary line who determines who can and can't be insulated. This sort of stuff was bulldozed through with very little involvement or discussion - the way it got bulldozed through. (1)

But what has that got to do with what this text is talking about? (3)

In a minor sense I guess I see some oppression here but what do I do? Do I join the car cavalcade and make a protest with the others if I see this as oppression? (1)

Not in the army car you can't do that! (3) [laughter]

So are you saying oppression can take the form of political decisions made that affect people other than who make them whether they are black or white?

Yes. [General agreement]

It's like what's happened to the Governor-General's house - a unilateral decision - I wonder if that's not oppression. Or sale of Telstra - those sorts of issues do they come under this heading of oppression when they are things that are done without appropriate consultation. (1)

Obviously if you don't like it - but not if you like it. Then it's not oppression it's a favour. (3)

So for me then the question out of this is, do we consult people and where do I cast my vote? There is a certain tension in this which one is not encouraged to do in a military position. (1)

Like be a local activist? (2)

Certainly not. It is totally inappropriate for me to throw myself under a bulldozer or to link arms with people protesting - we are not encouraged to do this. (1)

Be ok if you did it out of uniform and no one saw you do it. (3)

Then it's not worth doing is it? (1)

In fact we got a Minute recently saying it is inappropriate for military personnel to be seen to be involved in party specific politics. It is seen as inappropriate for us as the servants of the government - instruments of the government - as being involved in party politics. (1)

But you've got to cast a vote. (3)

Yes, but that is done in private. (1)

What we are talking about is a profile in party politics, so there are a lot of oppressive issues in the community that we can't in our position talk about. (1)

Yes, but Jesus is proclaiming the acceptable year of our Lord or the Lord's favour so what does the gospel say to a military officer who wants to be an activist? (3)

It says 'get out'. (2)

Hey, you weren't meant to say that. (4)

Either it means this is a valid ministry and I believe God has called me to do this and thereby it excludes a range of other community involvements and that this is valid and we meet the oppressed and the distressed here in this context, and we move from the categories Jesus had in mind then to the categories we find in our day, like private soldiers who get stuffed around day and night. Yesterday a warrant officer was talking to me about senior NCOs living in the mess - their distress is of their own making - living divorced or separated - a bunch of people whose lives are wrecked. They fall into this category. So this either says to me get out of the military because you are being called to other things, or it says this is a valid ministry and I have to restrict this - I don't have too much difficulty with that. You can't cure Aboriginal problems, environmental or drought problems, all in one person. (3)

So does this mean you in your small corner and I in mine? (1)

Sort of. (2)

We each have tasks to do. (3)

Well some-one is called to man the searchlights and someone is called to man the candle. (3)

But what about the underhandedness of a government that changes the flight paths and crashes the prices of housing in a place like where I live? (1)

My conclusion is that any kind of underhandedness is oppressive. (3)

It forever runs the risk, if you're going to be the prophet, and you put on the uniform, it means you put yourself in the home town. I mean what I'm saying is you can't bring a prophetic voice to that situation because the army muzzles you politically. (2)

I'm not certain what I'm saying in that regard. (1)

Clarification - if you see oppression in the army can you do something about it? For example if an officer is treating a soldier unfairly can you intervene? (4)

One of the best parts about being a chaplain is you can be an advocate and speak up for those who are oppressed and other people listen and if you get the wrong answer you can play the chaplain's game and keep going higher until you get the right answer. (3)

In the army everybody has to be accountable to the person above them. So a soldier wanting to get off drugs can tell the next in command, then that person has to go to the next person and tell them. (1)

You go to whoever you have to to get it fixed, but if you don't get what you want from the lower rank you can go up until you have got what you want. (2)

The other avenue we now have is the equal opportunity and human rights commission - we can take people there if we want. (3)

Up until verse 22 everything in the story is going smoothly. What happens in the second part of the story and what is it that brings about any change and what, if anything, does it mean for us today?

Jesus tells two stories about incidences in their national past - in their tradition - where God's blessing goes to people other than the favoured nation, and he says that God is really good to anybody other than a Jew. Both of those people Naaman and the widow were not Jews. (3)

But the reason it seems to upset them was about the prophecy not being accepted. (2)

Yes, but there are the two illustrations of why a prophet is not accepted because of what that prophet has to say. (3)

The stories do not make a lot of sense without some knowledge of the Old Testament. (3)

We have to go back into the history of the text and we can do that because we have been trained in Old Testament. (4)

But you can get the point without doing that can't you? There were lots of other widows or lepers that the prophet could have gone to but didn't need too, but choose this one. (1)

Yes but that wouldn't have pissed them off chronically. (3)

Well there is enough in the text to work it out if you take verse 24 or 23, so it seems to be saying I can't do it here and then goes on to illustrate that at some other time in Israel the same thing occurred. (1)

So we have identified two things about the story. If we just read it as it is in front of us we get an emphasis upon the fact that prophets can't do things in their own home towns - tall poppy syndrome,- but if we use the historical information we come up with a different emphasis?, God may actually choose people other than Jews to do what God wants to happen in the world and so the historical reading let's us do that?

Yes. [General agreement.}

When they heard this from Jesus they were having some difficulty. (2)

No they weren't, they were having huge difficulty. (3)

Filled with rage or anger. So it goes from all felt wonder at his words to filled with wrath. (1)

So having had this discussion do these words have any meaning for this context today?

Indeed they do. Any officer who speaks out politically will be thrown out. (3)

The context that gets me is, that as chaplains we are representatives of the church and Jesus says here that it won't always happen inside the cultic context. God will speak outside, when and as and if necessary, and sometimes by a totally unchurched person there will be a clearer expression of what God is saying than via all of those in the churches and as representatives of the churches we are located into a whole lot of cultic constraints. (2)

But if we put our selves into the military context as the predominant one, not necessarily the church, and we speak prophetically, why can't we have the same result as Jesus and just walk back through the crowd if we are speaking God's words - why can't we win? Why do we have to fail? (3)

I think we are forever on the way to crucifixion. (2)

What do you mean? Sounds a bit pious to me. (1)

You're not going to win. (3)

I don't accept that because I actually think lots of people in the army are responsive to what they don't want to hear. (1)

Say that another way. (3)

I've gone to the Commander of one Brigade and told him some bad news and he changed. (1)

Well that was an occasion when you walked back through the crowd. (3)

That's what I'm saying. I don't work from the presupposition of failing. Jesus could have just shut up and not said anything, but he didn't, and he did survive at the beginning of his ministry. It seems to me he was running the ministry in the way he intended to ride it. (1)

A friend of mine once brought a new motor bike and he went out and just rode it the way he was going to ride it for the rest of his life. (1)

No tentativeness about it. (2)

So we may have to introduce ourselves to our commanding officers in a way that makes it clear that we have a job to do and sometimes we will say things they don't want to hear. (1)

In fact I suspect that if we get too many favourable reports about us we aren't doing our job too well. (3)

It's very easy to fall into the good old padre role. (2)

OK lets leave that and we'll go onto the next story.

Verses 31 -37.

Very simple little story. What's it about for us today? Any contemporary meaning?

We're not familiar with the demonic. I better be careful how I say that, but here Jesus is confronted by one who is demon possessed and there is an exorcism and

that is not typical of our ministry. The other thing that occurred to me was that when Jesus spoke they noticed the voice of authority, no tentativeness about the way that Jesus spoke. It was clear and with authority. Well if you go then beyond that, the question is - is there some sort of parallel between the demonic encountered in the story and what happens in our ministries today. And I guess that two things occur to me - one is our spiritual poverty that we do not recognise the demonic and the other is that this group of senior NCOs I had a conversation with yesterday, whose lives are in personal disarray - how do I address that as it has the hallmarks of significant evil? (2)

Does it parallel the story? (1)

Perhaps the question is why are you not familiar with the demonic in this context? (4)

I think that's garbage. (3)

Depends on what you mean about demonic. (1)

Let's take the word as we have in the texts that we have - demonic, evil spirit, spirit of an unclean thing - generally as the same thing.

This seems to talk about a personal demonic entity. Is this personal or an abstract thing? (1)

I'm not so sure they are separated. (2)

Look this is the point. When Jesus used the word evil spirit or demon everyone knew what Jesus was talking about. If we talk about demons today then as Christianity and faith has grown more sophisticated - why hasn't the devil grown more sophisticated ? What does the devil look like today? With a pitchfork? Not at all. Evil has grown more subtle. For example the gay mardi gra - basically it's an evil thing, but there's not little demons running about in all of them. (3)

Are you sure of that? (2)

I think the devil has grown more subtle. (3)

I don't think the devil has changed. I think he's the same as he's always been, it's only our interpretation that has changed. He hasn't changed at all (4)

All right, he's still evil, but he doesn't operate in the same way. He doesn't operate by grabbing hold of people and throwing people into fires. (3)

How do you know? That may be only in western society. Maybe what we are saying is we don't see this evil in the military. (4)

But this is the context we are in and discussing the question. (3)

In fact in the military context it is pervasive, evil that is. Temptation and the My Lai massacre is an example of this temptation to take force and use it in a totally wrong way. (2)

But they didn't see any demons. (3)

For clarification are we saying that we don't see evil just in an individual manifestation but it may take a form that is bigger than that?

We can't confine evil to that individual realm - it takes bigger forms as well. (3)

This text talks about a personal demon. But I'm suggesting the way the devil operates today is more like a computer virus. You can't necessarily see it but it's there all the time and it's a bloody nuisance. (3)

Can we actually identify or name any of the modern demons?

We need a virus buster. (3)

Demons inside the military? (4)

There is always the temptation for any military organisation to move towards militarism, where the end justifies the means. (2)

The negative side of what we do? (3)

No, I'm talking about the attitudes that undergird what we do - like ethnic cleansing - the evidence recently of the unnecessary bombing of Hiroshima - they just wanted to see what it would do - that's an expression of militarism. The My Lai massacre is also an expression of militarism - the ends justify the means. (2)

But the bombing of Hiroshima was a cultural necessity of the day and from our perspective we shouldn't change or challenge that. It was an unavoidable sin as they could do no other. (3)

I'm not so sure it may have been unnecessary violence as the Japs would have surrendered anyway. That's the most recent historical information. (1)

If it was going to save the lives of millions, then maybe it could be justified but otherwise it could not. It's the ends justified the means mentality - not just doing what is necessary to win the victory. That is the idea of just enough force to do the job. (2)

A good illustration about that is last night with Swartzkoph in the Gulf War using only enough force to do the job. (4)

But any use of violence lends itself to evil. (2)

What does that mean in this context?

You have to be constantly careful. Not only yourself but while there is a propensity for evil in violence there is a corresponding propensity for evil in power. When we put on a uniform we have to be careful of the way we approach power and authority. (3)

But even if we just discuss the chaplain's department, look how its history is paved with violence in positions and relationships. (1)

OK, we have identified demons in the story and we have named some of them here but the story goes onto say Jesus exorcised the demons. What does that mean today here?

I don't think we can exorcise but we may well have to live with and it's a constant because you can't have an army without the propensity toward violence and power. (3)

It brings to mind the way in which violence and power are taken from the military and transferred into the home, so that if a corporal has been kicked around he goes home and does the same thing. That's evil. (2)

But that happens in all sorts of places. (1)

The ongoing question, as we have run out of time, is how will it relate to here in an ongoing sense? (4)

Meeting 4 : March 7

Our reading process will remain the same. We will take the text as we have it, and read it as story, and ask what happens looking at characters, setting and plot, even if we think we know the story really well and then what does it mean for us today??

Luke 4 : 38 - 44

So who are the characters, what is the setting and the plot?

It's about Jesus healing different people and then saying 'I have to go and do this in other places as well'. (3)

How relevant is it to us? (4)

Maybe it's about spreading yourself too thin. (3)

It raises the question for us about what we do when we visit the sick in hospital and what do we do with them? Do we rebuke the pain in their leg or tell it to come out, or anoint it with oil? (1)

That seems like a contemporary question! How do we deal with this as many Pentecostal ministers are coming in as chaplains. So it raises a whole bunch of questions about healing in today's setting and what we do when we visit people who are ill. What do we pray for healing. or less pain or what? (1)

When I was on manoeuvres in the Australian bush I read the book of Acts and decided that that was how the church was then, but it is not like that today, and either that's the way the church should be today, or that's the way it was then, so there has been some changes and it raised the question when did the church change? So it made me ask what is it we're missing out on that they had then? It must say something about Jesus practice of his relationship with God that this kind of healing is around. It also seems to me Jesus is responsive to where God is leading him so he moves on at the right time. So why does he need to move on? A vague thought or he's tuned in to God. So it says to me that the journey of faith is just beginning, and I struggle to find where God is leading me to. (2)

I think that as somebody who is somewhat charismatic I have in some sense experienced some of these things in my conversion, but it seems to me you have a great experience with God but then an almighty crash. There would be some who would say this is the way the church should be, as it was back in Acts, while others would say no that's semi-superstitious and it happened then not now. We need a balance between the two. There are two kinds of people - the very rational and the ones who want more. Because of this mixture and the very different backgrounds between then and now, we need to ask, what do we mean when we

want the miraculous? I would have to ask the person if they wanted healing in a miraculous way. (4)

The question then that arises is given the then of the text and the now of our reading, how do you know what is divine, transcendent, God, other? How do you know you are being led?

I don't know how to say it - hey I just know. It's an individual thing and it's like that when it comes to praying for healing for a person. (4)

In the text it's obvious - the healing and the demons come out screaming. (3)

But the question is how do we have a sense of knowing what is happening in terms of God leading us. (2)

Well if you've got screaming demons you know something is going on but I don't have that experience today. (3)

For me it's a pastoral response. If someone asks me to intervene in that kind of way then I do. I have exorcised a house for someone, and they have told me weeks later that everything is now fine. I do not know what to make of it? I accept that this thing worked. (2)

But in the text here, Jesus does it all the time, not just 3 times in 20 years. But that's the way it works isn't it. The experience of the New Testament and the way it works now is not the same as we have today. The expectations are different, the timing is different and the cultures different. (3)

I think you're overestimating. In the New Testament the level of healing wasn't phenomenal but it was a dimension of the early church. Even Paul couldn't heal and another time the disciples couldn't do it. (2)

But what do we call healing today?

What I call healing today is that I can walk around on my leg after significant surgery and the day after my friends prayed that my back pain would go away I was able to walk. It's a combination of the both - modern medicine and prayer - even speeding up the process. (3)

Yep, a combination of modern medicine and prayer for healing is the miraculous today. (1)

But there are people who don't get healed and I can't explain that. (2)

Doesn't this say to us that we should expect the miraculous to break into our reality but it comes and goes? (3)

Yes it is serendipitious. The other is the better my relationship with God, the more aware I will be of the miraculous. In the Old Testament stories about the exile and the idolisation of Jerusalem by the Jews made the other option, to look forward to Babylon as understanding God is leading them on. Looking to the future then becomes when new understanding breaks in. And it all comes down to a personal relationship or personal walking with God. (2)

Is the idea of a 'personal walking' with God, in the way you have described it in the text? Where do we find this idea of Jesus having this relationship with God in these stories?

Well it's not there directly but you have to make the connection with verse 42. (2)

So it's not implicit in the healing of Simon's mother-in-law?

The interesting thing is that Simon's mother-in-law was healed so she could get up and serve them. (4)

Where does it say that? (3)

Oh, it seems I assumed it said that - although she does get up to serve them - but that's not the reason she was healed, ok. (4)

What about when people don't get healed in our contemporary setting?

In the passage there are people who resist Jesus and so he can't get through to them, so healing does not take place. Then he seems to walk out on people and say there are other places I have to go to. (2)

I can't explain it. (1)

It's tough. (3)

There is no definitive answer to this question. (1)

The ultimate healing is in our relationship with God. (2)

Regardless of the anomaly it doesn't mean we stop praying for people to be healed. (1)

Pain can also be about who we are as people and we can see healing in this in our jobs. (2)

Luke 5: 1-11.

Do we need to run through the stuff in the story. We all know it's about the call of the disciples, with Jesus James and John and Simon by the lakeside. (2)

Ok, does the story have meaning in our context?

It's teaching about not being discouraged. (4)

Did they respond eagerly or begrudgingly at Jesus suggestion in verse 5 - 'yet if you say so I will let down the nets'? Was it responsive or only agreed to begrudgingly? How they would feel when discouraged? (2)

I'm not sure what it is you are saying. (1)

The bottom line is 'stick with me', says Jesus, and, 'you've got a future'. I'm not quite sure what left everything meant either, unless you go outside of the text. I mean does it mean they left everything like their business or the father took it over? (2)

Well, what does it say?

They left everything and followed him. (3)

What does it mean today?

It may mean leaving something? But God does always seem to provide a Zebedee to look after things. (4)

Well it does come to mind that as a chaplain in this system you become an economic conscript and it becomes impossible to leave because you loose too much financially, like your twenty year pension. To leave everything would create chaos. So the question is - am I in this for the money or what would happen if I had to leave everything? (4)

On that basis how does one know they should stay in the army? (3).

Does any one feel they are being led out of the army? (2)

[Silence]

Obviously not. This is a leading or a sense of settledness that confirms our calling. (1)

But here's where we can become too comfortable - can't it? (4)

Let me say that Peter was called out of a very successful event. He got all the fish he needed and more, and his response in face of this success was to fall on his knees and say, 'I am sinful' and 'depart from me', but Jesus doesn't do that, he calls him from this place of success. (2)

All I'm saying is that in this concept of call there can be a great range of emotions expressed. (1)

Just want to focus a little more on the text and perhaps move onto the healing of the leper? Anybody want to say any more of this story?

Just that like Peter I don't have to be perfect to be called. (1)

It reminds me of the people in the army who want to dismiss chaplains because they don't see themselves as measuring up so we face the challenge of accepting them despite their unacceptability. This is a challenge. (2)

The thing that hasn't been touched upon so far is that Jesus called successful middle class businessmen to be his followers on this occasion. (3)

And its the same later on with Levi. (2)

What about Jesus cleansing a leper; does it mean anything for this context? Are there any lepers in this place ?

I'm not sure I can allegorise leprosy in this context without being mutinous! But if we take Jesus' example of his willingness and his desire to be right at the spot where things were rotten, it's an adequate reading of the text. (3)

What you mean is who are the ritually unclean in our situation? (2)

But we work in an inclusive environment. (3)

I mean the guys which stuff up so regularly that they become outcasts in terms of the army they are in. (2)

That's where our ministry becomes very difficult because at this point we have two masters. We have the system which says, preserve things the way they should be by getting rid of the failures, and then we have the ministry to the individual. One of the best things I have been able to do in this context is to get people to leave the military. (3)

When you say an outcast in the army what do you mean?

A person who is making mistakes or misplaced. Not everybody suits the army and they won't be made to fit, so it is the best thing sometime to leave the army. (1)

There are others who people try to get out that you would in fact try to salvage. (3)

They are the victims and generally victims of the system. (2)

So people I might identify in my community as lepers like HIV positive people, or members of the intravenous drug using community, don't exist in the army?

Very limited indeed. (2)

The G-Force is one group that may be a little marginalised as they are the group in the military forces that represent gay and lesbian people. But most people simply prefer not to take any notice as long as that gay person sticks to themselves and does the job. The more discreet the better. (2)

In the military, in this context, a leper would be a person who is a real Bible basher, so in one sense zealous chaplains can be leprous. (1)

<u>Meeting 5 : Friday March 29</u>

[The meeting opened with spontaneous discussion concerning how we read and understood the text as the word of God]

I have been thinking about some of the things we have been saying and it seems to me that we say too much of it is 'grey matter'. You know that we are not sure about bits of it. But I think this is wrong and that the Bible is much more all black and white. What the text says is true. How we apply it may be up to us in particular situations, especially pastorally. Like homosexuality is wrong - black and white in the text- it's condemned, but the person is not condemned in terms of pastoral contact - you still have to show care for the person. (4)

But what presuppositions do we bring to the text? Could one of these be was that we don't like homosexuals. (2)

It's more like some people read only the bits they want in the text. Like Paul's writings are clear about head coverings in the text but this is ignored. When women are ordained it goes against the spirit and the letter of Paul's writings so the minute you ordain women then you condone homosexuality by inference. (3)

That's a bit much (2)

Well we have revoked the ordination of women in the Presbyterian church. (4)

Most reasonable conservative churches has thrown out that hermeneutic and said it is stupid. (3).

Are we talking about what might be called hermeneutic consistency or integrity here?

In what sense do you mean? (1)

Well look at 1 Timothy in chapter 2 about women in ministry, and how verses 11 and following were often used to keep women silent, but the men who did this did not read the verses 8 -10 in the same way.

[The group consulted 1 Timothy 2 : 8-15]

Well it does seem that some parts are stressed more then others. (4)

Or could it be that the New Testament has inconsistencies in it? (1)

Yes, I strongly agree. How do you use Scripture to prove your point of view. (3)

It gets back to the question of the place of Scripture and its truth. If we are going to say Paul had a different understanding to the Gospels, or Paul is wrong in this area, then we have the problem of the difficulty of the authority of Scripture. If you take away its authority what authority are we left with? Our own presuppositions? What's the control for the reading for the text? If we take the parts of the text apart in that way, then where do we go for the definitive words of truth in life? (4).

There aren't any. (3)

Then what's the cross about? (4)

The cross is about God encountering human beings. (2)

So God is not the answer to the great issues in life? (4)

God is the answer, but to say that the answer is as in holy writ is to say well ok, which of the bits of holy writ will I take notice of, because there are contradictions or different accounts of stories, for example - how did Judas die? There are two accounts! (2)

That doesn't necessarily mean this Bible doesn't speak to us about God. (1)

It must speak to us about God, this is a key question for the discussion. (4)

The question is what is the control for truth in reading this text? What is the test for truth?

For me the truth is in Scripture. (4)

The real question is how is it in Scripture. (1)

In the long run I see Scripture as secondary, in the sense I depend upon my relationship with God, which is informed by the church of which I am a part, the Scripture, my own faltering devotional life, and if I read Scripture correctly God speaks to me and if I'm not hearing then there is something wrong with my relationship with God. (2)

So Scripture is a conduit? (3)

Scripture stands as a paradigm for seeing that God speaks to every generation and to all people and there is the whole mosaic of God speaking, and some people listening, and some understanding and some getting it all screwed up and the details don't really matter. (2)

So is it something of a measuring stick for your hearing? (3)

Or is it about the how people relate to God rather than the specific what? (1)

It can come in any way - it may be through a verse in Scripture or it may be through something else. God is not constrained by Scripture. (2)

I can tell you the way in which different traditions read the text. The Anglicans when asked what the text is saying run round behind the Bishop, the Catholics run round behind the tradition of the church, the Baptists run round behind their version of the Scripture - the trouble with the Uniting Church is that they just run round. So for me if I want to say what is the text saying, I have to include all of these but I can't run round behind them. For me it comes down to my personal relationship with God and by being informed by all these other things. (2)

This is a reasonable concept for people who can think consistently and who are smart enough to think for themselves but there are people who are mentally inept and also need to be guided and directed. So it then comes down to my relationship with God but also there needs to be an authority outside of my personal relationship with God as I lead theses other people. (3).

When I preach I am very text orientated but the authority of my preaching is taking the text and showing how the rubber hits the road, that is it touching people where they are. (1)

Does this mean preaching should then start from the contemporary world in which we live? It is interesting to note that the discussion has gone from reading the text to a discussion of hermeneutics and then onto preaching.

That's always the big question. Do you start from the text or the world? (2)

It's a matter of choice. (1)

Well let's see if any of this discussion is sharpened up by our reading of the text itself.

Chapter 6: 1-11.

These two stories are linked by the same theme, what Jesus was doing on the Sabbath. (3)

What is the first story about?

The religious hierarchy saying the Sabbath is holy and this is the only way you can be on the Sabbath. Jesus comes along and says I see it differently. (2)

What's the difference between what Jesus does and what the religious hierarchy insist is the correct way to go?

It's about the difference of doing or not doing. Jesus seems to be saying how can it be that you allow the person to stay unhealed on the Sabbath. So it seems to be what kind of person are you? But the idea of a Sunday being a holy day is really

not relevant as it could be any day that is a holy day here or when there is a service that has to take place like a Wednesday. (2)

In our context if there is a holy day then it has to be Anzac Day. There are certain parameters about how a chaplain and a soldier functions on that day, protocol like you really should spend two minutes silence and don't shorten it because that is dishonouring the dead. Whereas perhaps the very meaning of Anzac Day is to remember those who have fallen, and the real reason they have fallen is so we can do what we want to do - fighting for freedom and liberty - the best part of this holy day then would be the two-up and the boozy breakfast- the religious part of Anzac Day is part of that. So Jesus is picking up the inconsistencies in the practice of the Jews and their understanding of the holy day. We need to throw away the trappings of holy days and do the things that are real. (3)

Well now you're back to what is real? What is truth? (2)

Where is the consistency? (3)

In these two stories we have taken is there a text that points to a test for truth in those stories?

Yes, what is beneficial to another. (2)

It says the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. (3)

What does that mean today?

People before process. If we as chaplains just offer on the holy day, the silence and the word, then we are being unauthentic. We have to include the two-up and the breakfast. (3)

More a case of standing with the people rather than standing with the Law. (1)

Incredible risk if you actually believe God is actually in Babylon. (2)

To pick up the word 'risk' - the risk is in the second story as the Pharisees watch Jesus to see if he makes a mistake. The Pharisees watched him it says in verse 6 and Jesus knew their thoughts, but went ahead and took the risk, so there's a fair bit of risk involved in defying the establishment. (3)

Is the Sabbath a tool of life or the Sabbath a tool of death, is what the key issue is that Jesus raises. (2).

Lord of the Sabbath really means that Jesus is God and he determines what is appropriate on the Sabbath as well as every other day. (3)

Is there anything in the text which might point to what is appropriate??

Verse 9 spells it out. (2) & (3)

Can we read the story as a unit in itself or do we have to know something about the first century context?

It seems you would need to know what is the Sabbath and you'd need to know what a Pharisee was - at least I think you would. (1)

We know it is a post Easter document so we are aware of the importance of understanding the history behind the document. Historical context is helpful. Although you could possibly figure out that the Pharisees were the enemies of Jesus just from the story itself. (2)

To get back to our context what does the Sabbath mean here?

There are really celebratory days for the Army set by the system which is put in place by the powers. (1)

1st March is the date and the powers that be put a church service on it ! (3)

The 18th August is gaining significance as Long Tan day in the Vietnam war, a victory in the face of overwhelming odds. (4)

Is there anything in this story that talks to that tradition or convention?

The tradition should work for the people and the participants, not the people and the participants for the tradition. (3)

This may mean taking the risk of developing liturgy that is different from the traditional, which is along the lines of what I developed the last time we did this day. (1)

In this context, which you have told me in the beginning is the intersection of two of the most conservative traditions, the military and the church, does Jesus here provide a yardstick upon which you can base every tradition and institution?

If you take that point of view then the severe challenge to military chaplaincy is to have the tradition serve the people and not the people serve the tradition. (2)

The pressure is to conform to the norms and traditions of the clergy leading the congregation rather than meeting the needs of the congregation. (1)

This is one of the difficulties of denominational affiliations determining the process of chaplaincy as opposed to the needs of the soldiers. The Anglican church has stated it is not appropriate for Anglicans to receive communion from other Protestant clergy and there must be an Anglican led service each Sunday. Whose needs are met there? (3)

How do we translate the question Jesus asks in verse 9 into our current contemporary life? If we think about all the things that are in place - Sundays, denominations, the military, tradition, the church, politics and so on and ask that question wouldn't you have a whole lot of things that could be identified as not leading to life at all. I want to push this a little further because I think there have been ways of reading the text that have been destructive of life.

When I prepare sermons I aim at the Sergeants who are there because they have to be unlike the soldiers and officers who attend. The Sergeants are a rent a crowd - you turn up because the commanding officer wants you there. Not a lot of private soldiers there so if the Sergeants leave with a smile I feel good. (1)

So in this context you have a lot of people in church who are there because they have to. (3).

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Has our reading to date raised any further contemporary issues or questions for you in this context?

How does a senior chaplain address other chaplains? In terms of support, accountability and direction, how do you be a bishop in a loving manner? So it's basically how does a chaplain operate in his ministry within this system? (2)

It is the same question for the wider church. How does the body of believers support and discipline and encourage each other? (3)

This also raises the question once again of how denominationalism and departmentalism impact upon the ability of chaplains to do their jobs. What is appropriate, or who sets up what is appropriate? (2)

When we look at what Jesus does in the first two stories of Luke 6, we see he clearly went against the grain of what was understood to be appropriate, but we know the end of the story don't we. Jesus ended up on the cross. In the military this is potentially a big problem for us but maybe we have to go ahead and take certain decisions in the face of tradition and see the results in time. (1)

How do you remove a chaplain from his position with a system incredibly fair to the accused? I mean you have to really come up with a lot to get a useless chaplain moved on. (2)

Well let us continue to reading the story of Luke. Let's commence now at verse 12 and we'll take each story by itself, but from verses 17 on we'll take it as a whole as the teaching of Jesus and analyse it as we would a sermon or piece of writing.

The choosing of the disciples is what it is about. (3)

I am focussed on the spiritual aspect of this text. So here's another time Jesus spends in prayer in verse 12. If you want to live in relationship with God then Jesus is a good example of how to do this - spending a whole night in prayer. The church hardly seems to encourage that or its been reduced to what did you discover in your quiet-time? We bring our rules and regulations but here Jesus does something that is a personal relationship with God - an individual relationship with God. (2)

Where's that in the text? (3)

All right it's not directly there, but if you spend a whole night praying then you've got to ask what is the content of the prayer and what's the nature of his relationship with God. (2)

But that's not there in the text. The bit about a personal individual relationship with God is not there. (3)

So if you just take it as it is it's very difficult not to bring some assumptions to the text or presuppositions to the text. (4)

And we can do that from other stories we have read, like Jesus in the desert, so we have another part of the story before us when we read this. Jesus is in the desert for forty days and nights and obviously this is preparation before he had to make a major decision. (2)

But to ask the contemporary question about what this means, my answer is I don't know. I don't know too many people who can afford to be that tired the next day at work. Who could do it and go to work the next day because they'd be stuffed. Jesus' life style was so different. He could have had a snooze in the afternoon. Nobody was paying him. (3)

But we don't have to read it like that. That's too literalist. It's more about significant prayer before a major decision. (4)

All we can say is that's what Jesus did on this occasion. (3).

Any contemporary application to the text ?

Pray as you go. (3)

For me it says here's an option. Sometimes you've got to get away to give yourself some space, but it doesn't mean overtime. You have to make a major decision so you have to pray all night. (1)

I guess I'm saying that here Jesus built into his life this aspect of spirituality. (2)

Sometimes. (3)

Yes sometimes, but as a major component of his lifestyle. (2)

Moving on we have the choosing of the disciples - what is of significance to us?

Why did he change Simon to Peter? (4)

We know that to change a person's name then, was to change their allegiance so it was more significant then than it is today. It denoted authority over the person. (1)

The first readers would have understood this clearly. (2)

The contemporary example is when women want to change their married name to their maiden name to show they aren't owned by someone. (3)

Its an issue of identity or claiming. (2)

It's like commissioning an officer - naming a person's rank - it gives them an identity and it's from an authority. (4)

There's also the bit about the traitor - who became the traitor in verse 16. Was he already known to be a traitor? Why did Jesus include a suspect? (2)

No Judas changed. (3)

But hang on that's spiritualising the text. So we say Jesus never makes a mistake, but I'm suggesting that Jesus did choose someone who was bad and made a mistake. (2)

No, that's rubbish because if we didn't have Judas we wouldn't have a cross. (3)

What happens if Jesus meets Judas after the resurrection and says welcome home all is forgiven? Is this the nature of the God we have? (2)

Well how much of the traitor is in me? (3)

The whole point of the gospel is to love the unlovable, associate with those whom you would never want to associate with, accept the unacceptable, so if Jesus knew about Judas it would be totally consistent with what we know about Jesus for him to accept Judas as a disciple. (3)

Peter didn't have a good record either. (2)

Let's move on to verses 17 and following. After some healing, Jesus teaches and firstly we have blessings and woes. What do they mean?

Before we do that verse 19 seems meaningful to me. The bit that says there was power going out from him, and I just don't see anything like that today - individually or even collectively. (3)

Well this text is written for the church fifty odd years on from when Jesus was around and so that is the state of the church at this time, and they needed to know this power was with Jesus. This is the way things happen when God is at work. (2)

But in our context this would be treated with intense scepticism, and this probably wouldn't be acceptable. This level of power and authority - there's a starkness about his power we don't see today. (3)

I wonder if this kind of power were around us that we mightn't do what the scribes and Pharisees did for example. When Lazarus was raised, you know they said this is getting serious, and we need to get both Lazarus and Jesus and that I think is something of the reaction that happens to people who make charismatic claims to power in the church. We attack their theology and their person. (2)

If I heard stories about that happening to someone then I wouldn't have immediate hallelujahs in response I would be sceptical, and I suspect that is what the church would do. (1)

If that bloke wandered through the children's hospital and every ward he went into everybody was healed and he could repeat that infinitum - no way. (3)

The church wouldn't know what to do with him just like we didn't know what to do with George Fox, founder of the Quakers. (2)

What is this saying then? (1)

It says that Jesus doesn't work like this any more. (3)

No, it's we don't see Jesus working like this any more. (1)

So what I'm saying is that this is irrelevant for us today because God works in our society very quietly. This may not be the same in other places like the Asian context where God may be working differently, but here in our context it is clear that it doesn't happen. I do not see this here. (3)

Well maybe we can leave it that the text is the given - the way we read it differently the variable. (2)

I'm conscious of the time and I would like us to consider the teachings of Jesus in the remainder of the text. What do they mean ?

Luke 6: 20-26

In this context, if people speak well of you, it may mean you're not doing your job! (2)

Well in the army we don't have poor - we have stupid. Everyone gets paid adequately around $35000 so if they are poor it's because they don't use their money properly - they are stupid. (1)

We have rich and richer. (2)

Or adequate and rich. (3)

I have trouble with this concept, as it does not make sense to me that to be poor, is to be blessed. (1)

So Jesus was wrong? (3)

I have a lot of difficulty in understanding that the mere fact that a person is poor means they are blessed. I don't know what Jesus meant. (1)

I think it's stupid. The passage is painted in such extremes I find it difficult to make any sense of it. (3)

Verse 22 can make sense as it would have happened, I can understand that. (1)

Well let's see if we do a little closer reading of the text - who is Jesus talking to in verse 20?

His disciples. (1)

If it is addressed to the disciples, could it mean his disciples were poor as a result of following him? (4)

I don't think so, because he is surrounded by others as well. (1)

But if he is talking to his disciples then it does suggest they are poor and they are hungry. (2)

Well he uses the same sort of address when he gets up to the woes though, so it can't be addressed just to the disciples. (3)

Either way, Jesus seems to be saying your position in life seems to determine your position in the Kingdom. (1)

So what's happening for us here and now in our reality?

If I read this text in what it says it seems to be saying the more financially secure I become, the further I move away from the Kingdom. (1)

If it says something like that, it has to mean something different to poor financially - it must mean poor in spirit - a modifier must be popped in there, because what we have in the rest of Scripture doesn't make a whole lot of sense. (3)

If we were in the early church and all we had was the Gospel of Luke then (1) . . .

then I would say it's not canon and throw it out. (3) [At this point the chaplain threw his Bible across the room].

Why would you say that? What's behind the reason?

Because it's about faith and response, but all this is talking about is material. On this basis all you have to do is give away your goods and go around in sack cloth and you're in. (3)

But this was included in the canon which is about recognition of it as authentic. (1)

OK, we read these words in light of the bigger story and the question is what does it mean to us today? Can it mean anything to us today?

Verse 22 means a lot to me. If I had to make a stand that meant I was kicked out of the army and that cost me this job, and my pension, then it makes sense to me, and that's where faith comes in. (1)

So how do we read the rest of it ?

I think verse 24, about being rich, is a threat to me, because no matter which way it's looked at I'm richer then people on the dole, I'm richer than people living in public housing, I'm richer than any Aboriginal I've ever met, and I have the potential and capacity to become richer. What it seems to be saying to me is that if I take that course of action I get further and further away from the Kingdom of God. (1)

Why would Jesus say this? Why could that be the possibility that Jesus looks at ?

What it does say is that the accumulation of wealth is damaging to your discipleship. Now with Allan Bond and Skase I have no trouble seeing that. (1)

What about Dick Smith? He's rich but has a great reputation? (3)

That does seem to bring some of this contrast into focus. It may be how you use your money? (2)

Blessed are the poor brings to mind the rich young ruler - you can always interpret that by putting it into the story, so some people can be rich while others can be poor. (1)

If we find that tension here, what about the tension in this context, you might find with verses 27-31?

This is a personal ethic not a national one. Police are given a mandate to use force for the good of the whole of the nation and so is the military. That is the right to use force and violence for the greater good of society. (2)

I think it is possible that the teaching is aimed at Christians? (4)

What does it mean?

Loving enemies means don't kill more than necessary. If you have to fight, when you've won - stop. (3)

Treat the enemy with dignity. (2)

Yep, it means kill them cleanly. (3)

[A long period of silence.]

Human perversity means war, so this means let's do it with restraint. (3)

If you take this kind of stuff too far, you end up doing a Neville Chamberlain. (2)

The only reason I stay in this military force is because it is a defence force. (1)

But that's a bit messy. As military chaplains we are not in control of what happens. This culture wants results in war. For example a decision to wipe out ten thousand people in a country town to stop the advance of the enemy is a rotten decision, but a decision anyway, and that's what is required in a military situation and it may end the war. Or it may be more like retrieving the dead in Vietnam that allows respect for the enemy after they are dead. (2)

I think if we took this teaching 'love of enemies' up, it would lead to power without restraint and onto corruption. (3)

But the human condition is not hopeless. The battle of My Lai in Vietnam indicates this when the commanding officer would not let the soldiers butcher the dead. In a sense that is what this passage is about. Still for me there comes a point as a military chaplain where if you were in a non-democratic government I would have to leave the army. I'd have trouble with that. (2)

Same here, because the human heart is desperately wicked. (4)

But in reality we assume certain people like the police don't have to live by this text. So it may be the army is only ok in a peace -keeping context. But the rules of engagement in war govern response. Kill or be killed. The text is black and white as well. It is not about limited rules of engagement and it's not talking about life and death situations, so it 's not really relevant to soldiers, or to us a chaplains in the military. (3)

In a fallen world exemptions are given from reading the text in a literal way to military and police forces, for whom society had given permission to engage in violence with the enemy. (1)

But it does talk about our role and doesn't denigrate the humanity of the enemy, so even in the exemption we have to show restraint. (2)

[Silence]

Is that as far as we can go on this?

[The final and general consensus was that the last opinion was as far as the reading group could go.]

The first meeting of the group focussed on the major issues the group felt either shaped the questions they brought to the text, or where the issues they felt necessary to bring to any discussion of the text.

These were identified as being:

* Egalitarianism
* The women's movement
* The media and advertising
* Management principles
* Pleasure
* Plutocracy - the world we live in is run by a small minority
* The Protestant world view of work ethic and discipline
* Counter-culture
* Ecology
* Consumerism and economic capitalism
* Fundamentalism
* The Western idea of the Family
* Sexuality

In summary the group concluded the issues of consumerism and pleasure (how do we appreciate life) would impact upon the way in which they read and surface from time to time in the readings.

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY 10 MAY, 1995

READERS : David McNamara (DM), Ruth Das (RD), Jenny Keeler-Milne (JKM), Rowena Curtis (RC), Steve Jago (SJ), Mary Jago (MJ), Rex Fleming (RF).

Luke 4: 1 - 15

Characters: Jesus and the devil.
Setting: In a desert place.
Plot: The temptations are all natural temptations that we all go through. Jesus chose not to succumb because of a higher purpose he was choosing. (RF)

What do you mean? (SJ)

Well let's look at shoes - Nikes, for example. You might want to buy a pair. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with the Nikes like there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the idea of making bread. But if you choose not to buy Nikes today because in the making of the Nikes workers in the Third World are being exploited, then you have served a higher purpose, like justice. (RF)

Jesus is hungry in the wilderness for 40 days - no significance attaches to 40 days - it rained for forty days and forty nights. (DM)

About the loaf of bread. If you are Jesus you are being tempted to use power to stop his hunger and to make something out of something else, so it's about the questioning of power and how you use it. (JKM)

So we could use a plastic card to buy our groceries. (RD)

There is always that moment of terror when the girl takes your card and it has to be run through the machine, and then you wait in terror to see whether you have been approved. I never feel quite comfortable until the words approved comes up on the screen. Approved means that there is money in your account so you can take your groceries with you - it means that you're ok - the bank now tells you you're ok! (JKM)

What in the world today might make us hungry or famished?

People are hungry for meaning. (DM)

But what are we hungry for? (SJ)

I think the media makes you hungry for things you have to get and you see all the things like clothes, holidays, shoes, cars and it is the media that makes you hungry, especially the glossy magazines. I want the house in the Good Weekend! (JKM)

What is the story behind the things that makes us hungry?

It makes you feel good and it makes you feel successful and it even gives you power. It's beautiful to do so you feel important. (MJ)

It's marketing. That's the dominant story behind our hunger. (SJ)

It obviously affects us because it makes us hungry for all sorts of things. (MJ)

Is there any temptation to be aware of today in all of this? Is there any temptation to turn our stones into bread?

The temptation is only there if you have the money. If you're poor you can only dream. (RD)

Well how does this make the poor feel? (DM)

The market is not interested in people without money. (RD)

But money equates to power - use your power - use your money. (SJ)

It floated through my mind that religion is something that markets itself too - religion trying to market something - you need this people searching for meaning and security. I heard this on the radio today that last year in San Francisco five hundred new religions were registered - there five hundred new ones you can pick from on the internet. (RF)

People are hungry for a sense of intimacy. More and more things are taking away the element of human contact. People are interacting with screens and machines - like in the supermarket - interacting with one person interacting with the machine and you do the same. There is no eye contact - just the machine. There is a real sense of craving for intimacy - that sense of dealing with some one who is human and interested in them. (JKM)

Ok - now we look at vv. 5 -8. Is there any way we can see all the kingdoms of the world today?

Yes, yes, yes! On the internet, share market, TV - depends on what your kingdom is.

Jesus of Montreal amply illustrates this particular thing when the devil says if you become an actor all this will be yours, so it's what is my kingdom - we might be each offered something different in response. (RC)

What is Jesus response in the story?

He forgoes the power. (JKM)

But what is the response in the text?

Worship the Lord your God and God alone. (SJ)

Does it say anything to us today?

It is saying about getting to the extreme and idolising something which is why it is talking about worship. So what does worship do? It makes something a god in your life something you follow. (RC)

What does worship do for us today?

What it does is focus your mind and values on the talk or the conversation of the gospel away from the other talks in the world that try to dominate us. It is a chance to have another focus to step back from the rat race and to see what is important. (SJ)

We live in a totalitarian society where we are being programmed to think about living in a world of materialism and where being a consumer is what is really important and what is really critical about getting rich and to live in Double Bay. (RF)

Worship gives you a different way to understand reality. (DM)

Churches get into marketing though. There are many churches worshipping God in different ways and some people bring the market into their worship by asking God for consumer goods - prosperity gospel - opposite to worshipping in truth. (RF)

The New Testament brings into focus what true worship is. Worship is speaking out loud our values and beliefs, saying it to each other. (DM)

We always put ourselves in Jesus' shoes, but we can be the Devil. We can tempt other people with power and authority as well. We do have material things and power and all kinds of things, and we can tempt other people or try to persuade other people with and we can do that without integrity - it's not sharing, it's a power over. (MJ)

So the second temptation is also about power and the Devil wants to control Jesus (RC)

OK let's look at the third temptation in verses 9 -12.

Well it's a clever use of Scripture by the Devil where you rip something out of context and put it in isolation and say look that's what it means. (SJ)

It's about proving yourself - a challenge to prove yourself - establish your credentials. (MJ)

It's like bungy jumping but the rope is like the angels - its about taking risks. (DM)

If we put ourselves in the place of devil it's his question who are you really and show me who you are by doing this. (MJ)

That's the devil setting the agenda by trying to make Jesus show who he is. (RF)

People often say if you're a Christian you would do this or that - but they set the agenda. Then you're not a Christian because you won't do that. (RD)

Who sets the agenda for us?

Lots of stuff in society tells us what the agenda is - from clothes to cars. You will be like this if you really are who you say you are. That's what marketing and advertising does. It creates an image and sets the agenda. If we are who we say we are we will do this or that - if you want to be a managing director you will look like this. (RF)

If you pay peanuts you'll get a monkey - this is the ultimate test of who is acceptable in the market place. (SJ)

Can we put the church in place of the devil because it occurs to me that sometimes the church sets the agenda about if you say you are a Christian then you'll go off and fight in the Vietnam war or we'll test out who you are by the way you perform - probably even more threatening than the media doing it because of the power of the church, especially the hierarchical structure of the Catholic church. This could be very oppressive and put people under great pressure. (DM)

What do we get asked to do that puts God to the test?

You have the example of churches who won't recognise women in ministry. Because that's being destructive to the women who believe that they're called by God which then puts God to the test because its saying their sense of call isn't truly of God. (RC)

The devil distorts the story by taking a little bit of the story. (MJ)

Does verse 13 mean anything to us?

We need to be vigilant about thinking about the world in which you live and don't stop analysing the world, don't stop thinking and be aware rather than beware. (JKM)

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY 17 MAY, 1995

READERS : Ruth Das (RD), Jenny Keeler-Milne (JKM), Rowena Curtis (RC), Rex Fleming (RF), Steve Jago (SJ), Mary Jago (MJ).

Text: Luke 4: 14 - 30

We begin by identifying who the characters are in the story.

Jesus; the Jewish congregation - the ordinary people; historical characters Elijah and Elisha; Naaman and the widow of Zarephath. (historical characters because we know as did the congregation they come from the Old Testament)

Where is the setting?

In the synagogue.

What is the plot?

Jesus showing his knowledge of Scripture. (SJ)

Jesus coming into the synagogue and reading and talking about the reading and the people react. (JKM)

Ok so we will always try to look at the story and analyse it in this manner before we begin to ask what does it mean today. So let's have a closer look at the plot.

Jesus goes back to his home town goes to the synagogue and reads the Scripture and everybody thinks this is very good and then he illustrates his reading with two stories from the Old Testament and the people get very angry and try to kill him, but he gets away. (RC)

Lets bear with the story a little more closely and do a close reading of the text. In verse 16 what happens?

Jesus went as usual to the synagogue - you'll like that Andrew-getting people to church! (JKM)

It tells us Jesus was a regular attender, a normal Jew. (RD)

Why was he allowed to just get up and read? (SJ)

Well maybe it's making a statement in terms of a position in the synagogue about authority. Jesus is something important. He takes centre stage. Jesus wants to be heard. (JKM)

It also means that the congregation must have accepted the fact that he could do that, he was handed the scroll. But why did he get to do it? (SJ)

Tonight we are started our reading at verse 16. But if we started at verse 15 wouldn't it be a little clearer why Jesus could simply do this in the story?

Jesus would have been in plenty of synagogues. (RC)

It raises the question of who put these headings in my bible and why? Why is verse 15 separated from verse 16 like this? (RD)

Biblical scholars - medieval scholars. (RF)

People who didn't know what they were doing. (SJ)

So we need to read the whole story as one. So Jesus stands up and reads Isaiah - does that mean anything to anybody else?

No. (RD)

Yes, he was a prophet in the Old Testament. (RC)

Crying in the wilderness. (JKM)

Jesus reads out a special passage. (SJ)

Does it mean anything to us ?

It says that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, like back in verse 14 - so he paralleling what Isaiah did. (SJ)

So what does it mean for us today?

It's a double thing. The Spirit has been leading Jesus and is now anointing him, so it's a double dose of blessing. (RC)

Well its interesting that the Pentecostal groups would focus in on the 'Spirit of the Lord' where we as a group from our backgrounds would focus on 'good news to the poor'. (JKM)

But what does it mean for you?

Well I don't know. (JKM)

It could have different meanings - there are probably lots of meanings. (RF)

Well how as a reading group do we understand this in our contemporary world?

Interestingly it doesn't talk anywhere here about prosperity type theology. It's talking about the very basic needs. Nor do we major much on recovery of sight to the blind, release for the oppressed and we would be supportive of that as well as good news for the poor. (SJ)

It's about Jesus saying this message is for a particular group and identifying the group and saying its good news. (JKM)

But what does it mean for this contemporary group?

I think we have a good deal in common with the congregation in Nazareth because they reacted quite violently to what he had to say, because he saw then as being a privileged group, and we living in Australia have more in common with the congregation than with Jesus. (RF)

But this particular passage of Scripture by itself doesn't upset the congregation it's what Jesus says after that does it.

So verse 22. They were very impressed. (JKM)

A lot of people in the service of the poor forget about verse 22 and link the words of Isaiah with the wrath of the people but all the things up to verse 22 make the congregation pretty happy. (RD)

Do the words that Jesus read from Isaiah have any meaning for us today?

Well its about the mission of the church. (JKM)

It's what we should be doing today. (SJ)

What do we do about the recovery of sight to the blind Ruth? (MJ)

Get a corneal transplant but there are not enough people who are willing to donate their eyes for me. (RD)

Well if this is about the good news of the gospel and Ruth is blind, what does it mean to us today if this is supposed to be the mission of the church?

We should all make sure we donate our organs when we die - a response for all the people waiting for organs to live even. (JKM &RC)

We could say it means spiritually blind. (SJ)

But is the word spiritual there in the text?

No, but a lot of things Jesus alluded to were spiritual. (SJ)

But doesn't it also show something about our histories, where we come from. We have had years of stuff pumped down our throats about the spiritual stuff, about spiritualising Luke. (JKM)

The words become cliched. (RF)

Shouldn't we look it up in the Bible - Isaiah 61 1-2? (SJ)

Ok, what does it say??

It says something different - opening of the prison to those who are bound - comfort all who mourn - assist the afflicted. (SJ)

Is there anything there that alludes to the spiritual?

No, it's even more graphic with the opening of prison doors. (RC)

But maybe Jesus didn't have the same schizophrenia that we have. We have a strongly separated spheres of spiritual over here and physical over here. Maybe that's something we shouldn't have because if we look at Jesus' ministry he had a double focus on both spheres simultaneously. We've got this schizophrenia - a way of thinking that is quite destructive. (RF)

We can also be the eyes for people that are blind by lending them our eyes, like I do when I visit Lilly who can't see and I read to her. (RC)

It's very hard to say in today's world however, that all the people in prison should go free, because in our society we have people in prison that should be there. We can't just say all you guys and gals go free. We wouldn't want to do that. (SJ)

But there are a lot of people in prison who shouldn't be there. (RC)

Yes, but it doesn't say that only the ones who shouldn't be there should go free, it says everybody - its general freedom for the prisoners. (SJ)

In my translation it says captives (RF) . . . sounds more like captives than prisoners (JKM) . . . captives are more like those people who are captive against their will like the women on the Thai Burmese border or captives like the amnesty victims (RD) . . . it seems that the word should be captive rather than prisoner which does change the meaning. (RF)

So in our contemporary world we have identified two types of prisoners, which are prisoners who have broken the law and people who are captive, those who can't afford the money to stay out of prison, unlike the Bond's of this world and Aboriginal people. (SJ)

For people in prison you also need to peel back the layers that show the structures that have kept them in prison. (JKM)

Most people would say today why open prison doors? So what people would be in prison? The poor and Aboriginal people, which opens up the question of power, and access to power. (RF)

But the church is not too worried about this aspect of our society today is it? (SJ)

So how do you get them out? I've come to set you free as a group of words does nothing. (SJ)

Politicking, getting involved, raising your voice, raising consciousness, raising awareness, writing letters, pestering people in power, all that and more. (JKM)

It may also mean people who are captive of things in their own lives. They're in every suburb of our city. It doesn't mean then to be captive to something you have to be in prison, and surely the message is there for people who are captive from something. (SJ)

So what happens now in the story?

Well now it gets very poignant as they say in the trade. Jesus sits down and is the centre of attention as all eyes were fixed on him. He speaks while he is sitting down (MJ)

So verse 21 what does that mean?

I'm important, you'd better listen, you're part of history. They probably thought he was a bit arrogant but then they are all amazed verse 22 and then they say isn't this the son of Joseph? (JKM) . . . a little bit of knocking off the tall poppy (SJ) . . . it's the big tall poppy syndrome. (RC)

We would say its ok to say that, but we know how you live your life, we know the 'real' you (RC) . . . or you're from Blacktown north! (RF) . . . or we might identify people from their church background or denomination like that person is a Catholic. (JKM)

What it says to me is it's almost too good to come from Joseph's son's mouth (SJ) . . . like a bit of a put down (JKM) . . . like this guys not been to university (SJ) . . . or you know something from a person's past that you think you can disregard what they say. (MJ)

How does Jesus respond?

He says in verse 23 a proverb - physician heal yourself (MJ) . . . what was he doing healing people? They might also have asked (SJ) . . . so that's why he might say that kind of proverb.

And what does he say at the end of verse 24?

A prophet is never welcomed in his own town. (RF)

It means, wouldn't matter what I did or said, you wouldn't welcome me anyway. (MJ)

Very similar too today when a young person leaves school and gets a job but they're never really allowed to grow up and be accepted as a qualified person. (SJ)

In our home town Woolloomooloo or the inner city - does it mean anything in that context?

No, not at all. (SJ)

Really? (RD)

I was thinking of Laurie being what he is amongst us, from the area, who's got a leadership role in the community and the church. (SJ)

So then Jesus tells two stories in verses 23 and following. What are they about?

Well the first one is about Elijah being sent to a widow in Sidon during a severe famine, but doesn't say why (JKM) . . . the heaven was shut up (RD) . . . yes but why send Elijah to a widow? (JKM) . . . all right it doesn't say why (RD) . . . and the other story is about a lot of lepers in Israel at the time of Elisha and the only one healed is Naaman. (JKM)

These stories don't really make a lot of sense for us today without some background material do they? (SJ)

We should at least look up the stories in the Old Testament for next week. (MJ)

[Two group members volunteered to do that for the next reading group.]

Maybe the people get angry at the end of the story because Jesus places himself in the prophetic strand like Elijah and Elisha? (JKM)

We will return to this story at the beginning of next week.

But the practical outcome of this reading tonight is, I think that we should do some letter writing, like the amnesty international people do as a group. (JKM)

[The group agreed and a date was organised for a letter writing evening.]

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY NIGHT 24 MAY, 1995

READERS: Rex Fleming (RF), Mary Jago (MJ), Rowena Curtis (RC), Jenny Keeler-Milne (JKM), Craig Keeler-Milne (CKM).

Last week we got up to the end of verse 30 in Luke Chapter 4 and some people had to do some homework for us.

When we read the text we said what is the story of Elijah and the Widow at Zarephath and what is the story about Elisha and Naaman the Syrian? Someone was going to look these up and make sense of them. So something has happened in the story. The major thing that has happened in the story is that when Jesus read the scroll of Isaiah and said this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing, everyone was very happy with him, no problems, they all spoke well of him and

were amazed at his gracious words. However he then goes on to talk about what it is like to be in your own home town and uses a couple of examples of things that had happened in the history of Israel, and at the end of this little part of the story there is a complete mood change in the audience. The congregation that were really pleased with him at the beginning are now very unhappy with him, so unhappy in fact they try to throw him over the cliff. Why?

Because of these two stories. (MJ)

Mary has the first one. (JKM)

The characters are Elijah, the widow of Zarephath and her son comes into it very briefly. There is a drought in the land and has been there for a few years, and Elijah tells King Ahab there is going to be a drought, that God has told him. God then tells Elijah to go to a brook where he will be fed by ravines and there will be water for him. When that dried up God came to him again and tells him to go to Zarephath to a widow who will supply him with food. So he goes to the widow and she doesn't have any food, except just a little bit left, but the whole time of the drought she is able to feed herself and her son and Elijah. I suppose the thing about the widow, however it doesn't really come out in that story, is that she is not an Israelite, she is from Zarephath which is somewhere else, so she probably isn't a believer in God. However Elijah is told to go to her. That is the story they got so angry about. (MJ)

What in the story do you think they get angry about?

Well, maybe the fact that he went to this woman. I don't know a lot about her except that widows were a, not sure if you would call them a low class, but they were a marginalised people without much, and Elijah went to her. Jesus is saying I'm not welcome, and the fact that Elijah would go to a marginalised person, Jesus is saying that is probably why you will not have much to do with me either. (MJ)

So a marginalised person who was a widow and what else did you say before?

She wasn't an Israelite, probably not a believer in God, not a Jew. (MJ)

Excellent, so we already have two interesting things about that little story that we will come back to reflect on in our contemporary world. Jenny, what do you have about Naaman?

He was a Syrian, so he wasn't an Israelite either, and he was actually a military man, a commander and reported to the King of Amman. Anyhow, he served the King. Apparently he was quite a successful man, highly respected and regarded and the only thing is, he had leprosy, so it says all those positive things first. He is obviously working, but had this skin problem, leprosy and so there was a young girl who was a servant who was actually from Israel, who had actually been captured and brought over to Syria, and it turns out that she looked after Naaman's wife so she was a servant girl in their house and she had heard about this Prophet in Samaria and she suggested to Naaman that he go and see this prophet. As soon as Naaman heard about this he went to his employer, the King and said, can I go. And he said yes, you must go and I will also send a letter of recommendation with you to the King of Israel and so he went and he took this letter and some money. So he went and the first person when he got to Israel was the King and he had this letter which would get him an audience obviously.

Anyhow the King could not understand why Naaman would come to see him and he tore off his robes and basically said why me, am I God, am I meant to bring

people back to life, why me? Anyhow Elisha the prophet had heard that the King of Israel had tore off his robes and obviously couldn't do anything to help this fellow and he basically said, send the man to me, then he will know that there actually is a prophet in Israel, in other words the King is not much chop, send him to me. So Naaman went to see Elisha and his orders were from Elisha to go and wash seven times in the River Jordan and your flesh will be restored and you will be clean. Anyhow Naaman was very angry because he thought he would get some amazing touch from God or something like that, he just thought this was so down to earth, he was really a bit frustrated. Anyhow he wasn't going to do it but he had a group of servants with him that basically said why not do it and urged him to do it. Then he did and his flesh was restored and he was cleansed and his skin was just like a young boy. (JKM)

So what would make them angry?

Well, I guess, well he was an outsider too. He was healed and he was really grateful. (JKM)

You said he was in the army? (RF) . . .Yes (JKM) . . . Would it have been the Syrian army? (RF)

Well he served the King so, he was the commander of the army of the King of Aram (JKM) . . . I wonder if they had occupied the land or something? (RF) . . . So he was a non-Jew and he was a soldier, could have been a military oppressor or something? (RF)

Well it sounds like it because this girl they had taken in captive, was a young girl from Israel and she served Naaman's wife so that they had obviously caused a bit of trouble. Then again, his boss wrote him a letter and must have thought that he would be received at the other end so, (JKM) . . . Received by? (RF) The King of Israel (JKM) . . . Maybe it was like a diplomatic dispatch. (RF)

Well, it is interesting that we have gone and looked at the other stories that this story is based on. Now, what do we think could have made all the synagogue fill with rage?

Because they were not of the Tribe of Israel, would that be enough to make them that angry? It must have something to do with it. (MJ)

Well who are Elijah and Elisha? Are they kind of major Jewish figures?

Prophets (MJ) . . . Great Prophets (JKM) . . . Yes, certainly are (MJ).. . . *And where are they sent?*

To foreigners (RF) . . . to help foreigners (JKM) . . . *And he'd just told those two stories after what?* . . . He said that no prophet is accepted in his own town. (JKM)

What might all that mean? . . . Well, basically that he will go to other people. He is not going to put them necessarily first. (JKM)

What about if we take the whole section now including Jesus' first sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth about the groups of people he is going to work with and then he tells those stories. What might it suggest to the congregation?

That it's not for them. (RF)

Yes, that's why they're angry because they are not the people he will be working with. (MJ)

And he has sort of drawn out something from the Old Testament stories that are not directly there from what May and Jenny have said, because he says there were many lepers in Israel and there were many widows in Israel but, and that is not so clear in the Old Testament stories it just sort of follows in the narrative. It's like Jesus was giving that a new, well not new, but drawing out an interpretation of it that maybe they had not ever twigged to. Maybe it was a sort of a shock, it was so clearly to other people that these prophets were sent. (RC)

Yes, the fact the prophets, their great men would go to someone other than Israelite widows and Israelite lepers, this could have upset them. (MJ)

Right. If you look at the total story then, with all those things in mind that we have said, what does it mean in our contemporary world or life experience today?

I think one point which we could make regarding our contemporary situation is the fact that Jesus was more or less being rejected by the main stream villagers, or community of his day, which the synagogue in Nazareth would have represented. He was putting himself in a position of an outsider by the way he talked with them and by mentioning the fact that the foreigners were blessed by the Old Testament prophets and maybe I think, my experience as a Christian has been that often if I say something or do something which I think is right which I have been led to, a conviction I have been led to as a result of God working in me, and often if that conflicts with what the bulk of people in the Church, or with what certain Church leaders think, I often feel, I often have experienced or made to feel as if I am a little bit on the outer. So I think Jesus was like a lonely person most of the time and that comes across in his ministry. He is often lonely most of the time even with his disciples and I think for me being a Christian has been an experience of loneliness a lot of the time because I have various experiences which are unique to myself and which I don't share with people and it is often because I feel sometimes they lead to rejection and I think maybe the point is that as much as we have to build up a community value we have also, if you like our own spiritual lives, and often that gets us into trouble or in my experience it has got me into - I feel as if I am on the outer some of the time - so for me that would be one application of this to a contemporary setting. (RF)

Basically it is sort of about that Jesus in a way is not concerned in some ways about the majority of those people who would have attended the synagogue as usual but he was basically saying to them, you know these people on the outside, the marginalised I see them as important and that was going against the grain. So, and I guess it will change culturally, in every society whose marginalised. Certainly those people were very near to the story. (JKM)

I think it is sort of saying too, that we need to be careful in the established Church now that, not Woolloomooloo, but in an established Church, that you get caught in your programs and what is going on there and you tend to forget the marginalised and I think Jesus is saying that we need to remember that too, as they are important to Him so they should be important to us. (MJ)

Can we make any kind of modern connection?

I suppose the parable of the wedding feast that we did at Epping, that would be one example of it (RF) . . . *In Luke 14*? . . . It was a similar situation (RF) . . . Bringing all the riff-raf into the Church. The idea that some people actually weren't sure that it was Rex and David and some people were not sure if you were part of

the play or who you were or what (RC) . . . Did they reject you (MJ) . . . I don't know. We sat at the front of the Church while the people were coming in to get ready for the service and David and I were just sitting there and people just walked past ignoring us, one or two spoke to us. It was a funny feeling (RF) . . . I remember you saying about it that you really put a big question in people, how could they react, relate to you. (RC)

So, just to see, can we recap then. With this entire story what do we think it says to our contemporary situation? Does somebody want to summarise what we said and we can then move on to the next story?

[Silence]

A brief summary would be if we follow our conscience and do what we think is right by God, we often find ourselves in conflict with established religion, with some of the more staid aspects of the church. That is a very crude and simplistic summary. (RF)

What are some of the areas that we might find ourselves in conflict with the mainstream church or the people who generally tell us what this Word of God means?

Certainly I have had one or two conversations with people I have known at University and also my previous involvement with Beach Mission, I have had a couple of disagreements with people over the thrust of evangelism or the whole content and nature of the gospel, and I think coming up against people who have a very, very narrow evangelical base to their belief, my experience has been a broadening of my faith and if I come upon someone who is very very narrow, for want of a better word, fundamentalist understanding of faith, I find myself in conflict over that - so for me that is one practical example of it. My background is Anglican and if I went back now to the kind of environment I was brought up in I would find myself violently in disagreement with what they were saying. (RF)

Anybody want to add anything else about this story?

The story gives us, like Mary was saying, a focus and a priority for making sure, like even at Woolloomooloo, we probably find ways to shut ourselves off from marginalised people and I guess it keeps in front of us all the time about our priorities there, to be doing these things that Jesus said. And Jen said a week or so ago that there are things we can do, and we want to do, and which are logical progressions from where we are, like writing Amnesty letters and opportunities where we can invite other people along to be part of that who maybe are not necessarily part of some of the other things that we do and I think that it is often the focus and the creativity that we have to in our modern situation, actually take that on board and say yes we are not giving up on the prisoners or whoever in this list of people. (RC)

Ok well the next little part of the story is from verses 31 to 37 so if someone wants to read some of those?

Reading : Luke 4 : 31-37

Let's start with the major characters.

Jesus once again. (MJ)

The man with the demon (RC) . . . the man with an unclean spirit or the spirit of an unclean demon (RF) . . . The people in the synagogue (MJ) . . . the people are there again (RC) . . . the demon (MJ) . . . and when the demon had thrown him down (RC) . . . So the demon is a character in and of his own right, correct? (JKM)

Ok, where is the setting?

The synagogue again. (RC)

Now Jesus is in the synagogue again, this is very interesting. How many bits of the story has Jesus been in the synagogue? The bulk of it so far. It has all been Jesus in church. So Jesus is in church, three stories in a row. (RF)

Just out of interest in the first time that it is recorded that Jesus is in the synagogue and the congregation is present, what do they do? Back in verse 15, he began to teach in the synagogue and was praised by everyone. Then in the next little synagogue scenario - that's not such a happy story. They were amazed and then they wanted to get rid of him - throw him over the hill. (MJ)

So now we are in another synagogue scene, and what happens this time?

They were amazed once more. (MJ)

With his teaching and then what he did with the demon. (JKM)

Jesus is being a wandering teacher. (RC)

I'm interested in the role of the synagogue? Actually what it is, because it seems to also be quite a social place, it seems to be the place, I'm trying to think of an equivalent today because it seems to be the place where everyone meets, everyone who is Jewish (JKM) . . . *Well how can you pick up from the text that everyone meets there?* . . . Well, ok, no I didn't pick up everyone, but anyhow there are a lot of people there, there were people anyhow. (JKM) . . . *Sorry, are you concluding that the synagogue must have been an important place for the people?* . . . Yes, but also wouldn't it have been different from the Church in our society? (JKM) . . . *Well that's asking an historical question, I mean we can answer it, but will that help us understand the text more?*

Well it would in a way, because people are sort of getting angry there, and they're standing up and Jesus is throwing out demons and reading, and like they are expressing their emotions and things are happening, and I think that is quite different to how our church operates today. So in some ways I am trying to get a feel for what the synagogue is and what it is about? What happens there? Why people go there and if we try to look at it in terms of our society today, what is it that parallels it, because it seems quite different to our church in some ways, in a sense. I mean it feels like, it feels almost like a lecture theatre. This sort of synagogue where people stand up and you know, it doesn't seem like our church in that sense. The feel of it is quite different. (JKM)

It's probably like a more serious and solemn event than modern day churches in some respects. (RF).

But I sort of get the feeling, and I could be wrong that it is like, I could be wrong, I just get the feeling that it is like a destination place where everyone went. (JKM)

I'm sure they would have all gone there on the Sabbath. (MJ).

[Craig Keeler-Milne enters the room.]

So that's why I asked the question, because you do have this, if you are asking about the plot, you know Jesus is there, he taught, he was like a guest, and then someone cries out. (JKM)

Perhaps something like a rotary club would be the best analogy, Jenny? (RF)

I don't know, I've never been to a rotary club. (JKM)

We had a woman cry out when Joy was speaking. We often have people calling out, a bit more than other churches. (RC)

Not in other churches. No no-one would call out in other churches. People wouldn't do anything, they would wait in most churches. (MJ).

So you sort of have all this activity and anyhow he basically called out in the church. I know who you are, and Jesus just tells him to be quiet basically, and calls the demon to come out of the person and then the man falls down, and it says the demon threw the man down, and came out of the person without the man being injured, and all the people were amazed, and they said to each other 'what is this teaching?', 'with authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out', and the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area. (JKM)

Ok, so what you are saying is that in helping us to understand this story we need to try and figure out what this synagogue was like? So that is an historical question. Do we have a volunteer from the reading group to find out anything about the synagogue that they can? We need fresh volunteers.

I could do it, just a general thing on the role of the synagogue. Any information I can find out about it from a normal Bible Dictionary. Just a short paragraph. (RF)

Ok, but if we were to say the synagogue is our 'church' setting, I mean the church in our setting and we'll come back to the historical question a bit later on, does it mean anything to us?

It's like the man who came up to me last Sunday and said, do you have a deliverance ministry for schizophrenics? (RC) . . . Oh, Rowena! (JKM) . . . No I said, but you're most welcome to stay for the service. That's right, it was the Sunday before, oh yes it is schizophrenic awareness week. (RC)

That's very similar to this story I think, but I don't know what the evil spirits mean? I have no idea? (JKM)

The Bible seems to be populated with them. (RC)

Evil spirits and demons, so I'm really interested to know. (JKM)

On Sunday the lady who, with the blonde hair, what's her name Mary? (RC) . . . she has a couple of different names (JKM) . . . well, Laurie was saying something, that's not funny lady and she said 'nobody is going to touch me'. She stormed out on Sunday and said that's not funny (RC) . . . I thought you said Laurie said 'that's not funny?' (RF) . . . No, no he said something and she said 'don't anybody touch me"' RC) . . . I think it was some point in the service when Laurie said for everyone to get up and greet each other. (RF)

It is just interesting that people in our church maybe don't say 'what have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth' but they do react to something that is coming at the word 'God', just the reaction from some people. (RC)

Just getting back to what Jenny was saying about evil spirits and so on, people these days would have interpreted a lot of things that we have the medical diagnosis for, being in possession of, due to some spiritual or psychic influence and also people were a bit more psychic those days as well, which is something to bear in mind as well. (RF).

Now, we have picked up the general themes of the passage. Let's go back and read it closely and say what is the plot as it unfolds. Just do it really simply verse by verse. Verse 31, Jesus . . . Jesus went down to Capernaum which is a town in Galilee (JKM) . . . *And what was he doing?* . . . And it was on the Sabbath and he began teaching (JKM) . . . *Ok then what happened?* . . . People were amazed at what he had to say (MJ) . . . *Why*? . . . Because he had authority (MJ) . . . *And what does that mean*? . . . His message had authority (MJ) . . . Because they identified, because somehow they identified with what was being said. They identified it as something that wasn't just completely off the air and to be disregarded, but they felt that it had importance, so that it must have engaged them on some level. (JKM) . . . Maybe as he spoke he sort of owned what he was saying, rather than just telling them something. Maybe that is where the feeling of authority came out to them and so they were amazed at what he was saying (MJ) . . . He probably had great confidence in what he was saying and probably a great charisma (JKM) . . . So we've got the charismatic teacher! Well that's what we just said I just put a couple of sentences together. (RC)

Ok everyone is astounded at his teaching, he speaks with authority and then what happens?

We have an interruption (MJ) . . . We have an interruption to his sermon or his teaching. (RC)

The demon is very naughty and decides to interrupt the sermon. (RF)

The demon decides to interrupt the sermon or the service and the person is there in the synagogue on the Sabbath when it is all happening. Who is this person with the unclean demon? (RC)

He was a man. (JKM)

We don't know whether the demon was a man or not. (RC)

He was a man, the demon is not gender specific, gender confused. (RF)

I don't know, it says he cried out at the top of his voice. (JKM)

In my version it says, he screamed out in a loud voice. (RF)

And what does the demon say to this charismatic teacher who speaks with authority?

He says who Jesus is and he starts saying what do you want with us, have you come to destroy us and then says 'you are the holy one of God'. (MJ)

In the very next sentence Jesus really whacks that demon one (CKM) . . . Be quiet, I have two things to say, be quiet and be still (JKM) . . . Be still and get out of here (CKM)

So in a sense if we put it into a story line, what is happening is Jesus goes into church, stands up and starts his teaching and someone else says who the hell do you think you are, what are you going to try and say to us, what do you want with us' and Jesus responds by saying 'Be silent and get out of here'. What does the nasty old demon do then? (JKM) . . . Does what he is told (MJ) . . . *Well before that?* . . . He throws the man down and the demon comes out of him without any trouble (MJ) . . . like spitting the dummy. (CKM)

Ok, and then what happens in the synagogue with the congregation who have been listening to the good sermon?

I would think they were amazed because of the very dramatic thing that had happened. (RC)

They now add that not only has he authority, but he also has power. (JKM)

This is a very successful story. This is a good one. (RC)

So what does it mean today?

There are Church groups that have a deliverance ministry on this issue and there are some Pentecostal churches who take this issue of demonology very seriously. That does not really speak to us as Woolloomooloo Baptist, but maybe it does. (RF)

How do we understand demons?

Well I think it is a load of rubbish, I don't believe in them at all. Well I don't anyway. (JKM)

I guess what I believe is that it's not demons, but something so bad that has happened to somebody, that it is like a demon in their life that has caused them to go bad - so if you really trace back with the people who are mentally ill it is usually in response to some terrible trauma, and in the ancient world would have been quite explained by a demon coming into that person at that time in their life and then controlling them from then on, and that would have been a fairly easily for their society to handle it because it is quite an objective thing. There is a demon in that person and that is why they are acting like that. For us it is much more complex, it is probably more important to try to understand people who are mentally ill because we have already been saying, this is happening in our Church, and with people in the Square and so on, and people that we deal with all the time are on medication to control their mental illnesses, but I guess I feel a real sense of frustration to know what can we do to heal those people? Beyond that, Jesus has used a trigger to heal this person and does that in several places and I just wonder, I don't believe in a deliverance ministry like what that person was asking for. But I do believe there must be ways in which we can help people who are suffering in this way and are so ostracised by society and all we can do is control them with drugs. (RC)

Let's name the demons we can identify in our contemporary world? Not the ancient world. Any demon that you can identify?

Child abuse (RC) . . . abuse of power and mental illness (RF) . . . drugs, drug addiction (MJ) . . . excessive urbanisation (RF) . . . rape (JKM) . . . domestic violence. (RC)

For a lots of kids it is something that has happened in their family (JKM) . . . broken families (RF) . . . someone has walked out or there has been abuse or hurt there, something has traumatised them for maybe many years (JKM) . . . abortion could be? (RC)

Let me press a little harder to name demons in our synagogue? In our Church community?

Homelessness - that pretty much traumatises people (JKM) . . . coca cola (RC) . . . yes, because a lot people in Woolloomooloo drink coca cola, addicted to caffeine, junk food, fish and chips (RC/JKM/RF) . . . junk food, so easy to spend your money on it. (JKM)

So we have identified a whole lot of contemporary demons and is there anything in the story that suggests what Jesus does with demons?

Yes, he gets rid of them . (JKM)

He acts quickly. (CKM)

Doesn't like them hanging around. (RF)

We have run out of time, but maybe we can think about what this means for us today when we are confronted by demons.

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY 7TH JUNE 1995

READERS: Steve Jago (SJ), Mary Jago (MJ), Rowena Curtis (RC), Rex Fleming (RF).

Luke 4: 31-37

Rex produced a copy of a National Geographic which had a section on Galilee and described from the article what was happening in the synagogue and the distinction between the local synagogue and the temple as the central focal point for the Jewish cultic ritual. This material was both historical and contemporary. It was agreed that looking at the geography and some of this information helped with understanding the text.

Verses 38-44.

Jesus was certainly a synagogue man! (SJ)

Characters: Jesus, Simon's mother-in-law, demons, crowd, sick people.
Setting: Simon's house; around Simon's house; a lonely place; synagogue.
Lonely places and synagogues are significant to chapter 4 of Luke. (MJ)
Plot: About healings, with a focus on withdrawal and meditation, and then with preaching.

What does it mean?

Jesus took time out of his activities to recover and recuperate and so should we. (MJ)

We could get the impression that Jesus was hassled and stressed out just by people's demands upon him . (SJ)

You also get the demons having a go at him. (RC)

I find that a little bit hard to agree with - the demons identify him as the Son of God and he rebukes them and he wouldn't allow them to speak - I wonder what the logic is behind that? (RF)

It could be that people see demons as a negative thing and anything they say is also 'demon' so Jesus tells them to shut-up. (SJ)

Why did he tell them to shut-up? (MJ)

[Silence]

This is not a major focus of the story is it? (RF)

Maybe the focus is that Jesus doesn't have to have people knowing who he is but rather what he is doing. The focus is on his actions not his title. This could relate to his announcement of his program at the synagogue in Nazareth, which is about what Jesus is here to do, not about what he is to be called. (RC)

Well let's move onto chapter 5, and read it through in full.

[Chapter 5 was read audibly by the group]

What are the new things that enter into the story?

Call of the disciples (SJ) . . . talks about forgiveness of sin for the first time (RF) . . . the kind of people he is mixing with and there is more relational stuff here (RC) . . . conflict with the religious leaders, as opposed to just upsetting the congregation - the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, a priest, and the disciples of John - so all of those have some kind of conflict with Jesus. So much conflict - its the same old story isn't it conflict between religious people. (SJ)

Verses 1 - 11

Characters: Jesus, fishermen of whom Simon Peter is named as well as John and James, and Zebedee was their father.
Setting: Beside and on the lake of Gennesaret.
Plot: Jesus tells them they will be catching men so they leave everything and follow Jesus. (RC)

It's because they are so impressed with Jesus. (MJ)

Simon Peter's response is amazing. He doesn't say that's a good trick but says go away from me I am a sinful man, which today I guess might mean you're too good for me to have anything to do with. (SJ)

Jesus doesn't accept this but calls them anyway. Jesus says don't be afraid - you will catch men. (MJ)

It was a very public call for these disciples when Jesus did this: It is not a private thing, which comes as a surprise. It is a very public and collective call. (RC)

It's significant the way in which Simon addressed Jesus. He must have recognised Jesus as a special kind of person when he called him Master. (MJ)

The word astonished seems to be in quite a bit of the story. In today's terms it's something you don't expect or you're surprised about? There is also a degree of fear. (SJ)

The whole thing would be fairly scary in the physical realm. (RF)

My guess is this story was good news to the poor because they were fishermen living off their daily catch and they had fished all night and caught nothing. But now Jesus came along and a huge catch resulted, so in that sense it is something that would be good news to at least the potentially poor. (RC)

There is a match or fit with what Jesus said in 4: 16-18 and what follows in Jesus actions. His words do in fact become real here. (RF)

This would certainly be the case today in poor countries of the world. (MJ)

It's hard for us to understand this today because we just go to the fish markets - but it must have been a great relief as well. (SJ)

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY 14TH JUNE 1996

READERS: David McNamara (DM), Bronwyn McNamara (BM), Rex Fleming (RF), Craig Keeler-Milne (CKM), Mary Jago (MJ), Rowena Curtis (RC).

[Luke 5 was read from verse 11, but the question about the contemporary meaning of the call of the disciples in verses 1-11 was not discussed as new members of the group were present who were absent from the past week.]

Although we haven't been very consistent we we're attempting to look at what if anything these stories might say to our contemporary experience.

It seems the main plot of the chapter is that Jesus is broadening the framework of how people see God, both in his actions and teachings. (RF)

And this would include his eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. (RC)

It also introduces the fact that the Kingdom of God is for people who would normally be considered to be outcast and not part of a religious community. (DM)

Not only does he heal the outcasts but also he is eating and drinking with them. (CKM)

What is the significance today? Does eating and drinking together in our culture mean anything today - how do we understand this?

It means more for some than others. Where I live it means a lot for Greeks, Yugoslavs, Italians and Muslims. It is part of their religious culture and it's very important, but for the broader Anglo-Saxon community it probably doesn't mean as much. (RF)

I would disagree with that. If you really think about it, we all eat with people who we really accept and we generally don't eat with people we don't accept. (CKM)

But it's also always more than just a meal - there's more significance associated with it than that. It can be about establishing relationships or bettering them. (MJ)

Ok, let's have a look at some of the stories that make up the chapter.

Verses 12-16

Characters: Jesus, a leper, crowds.
Setting: It just says in one of the cities (SJ) . . . So its an urban story. (DM)

The most powerful thing for me is the phrase 'he fell on his face' which by the way were about the only words in common between the version read out and the version I have. (CKM)

The leper comes to Jesus and recognises the power Jesus has, and the leper doesn't have anything to offer him to make him heal him, he just has his request. (BM)

Jesus response is to offer healing without requiring anything and his response is to stretch out his hand and touch the leper. (CKM)

What does the story mean to us today ?

If you get leprosy you should seek out a prescription. (DM)

[Silence]

Why did the leper have to see a priest? (MJ)

My Bible has a note that it's about a law in Leviticus chapter 13 verse 49 and chapter 14 verses 2 to 32. (CKM)

[The text was consulted and discussed]

Even after Jesus had cleansed the leper, the leper had to go and do all the things that Leviticus said (RF) . . . which may suggest that Jesus had only gone so far because the leper has all this other stuff he has to do. What it is saying is how despised the leper was in that day (CKM) . . . and how they were separated from God (DM) . . . what an incredibly high hurdle they have to get over to be accepted again. (CKM)

But was Jesus taking the whole Old Testament stuff literally? (RF)

But Jesus does say to go and do what Moses proscribed. (CKM)

If we take the story as we have it without any reference with the Old Testament do we come up with this conclusion? We seem to have some difficulty discussing this in light of our contemporary experiences? Does it say anything to us?

Well maybe it has meaning today for us as it may say to us that today we put too many hurdles in front of people to be accepted. Maybe it could be in our economic rationalist society in which we live that we put hurdles in front of people who are marginalised (CKM) . . . Like get a job, house, be efficient to be accepted (DM) . . .

yes, do we really honour and accept these people that are the poor in our society? (CKM)

I noticed that Jesus touched the leper, and it does show real acceptance to the leper, and it seems to me that we have to accept people where they are, rather than presuppose that they have to change to be accepted. (MJ)

This means we shouldn't wait for people to say to us I want to be saved, we should accept them as they are. (RC)

It's a going out to people as well as us waiting to welcome them like we do at the Women's Space for Sex Workers. (MJ)

Jesus definitely had a stress management course in process, if you consider verse 16. (RF)

Verses 17-26

Characters: Pharisees, teachers of the law, Jesus, a paralysed man and his friends, the crowd.
Setting: Somewhere one day in a house.

Plot: Some people brought a paralysed friend to get healed, and Jesus heals him because of their faith. The Pharisees don't like the fact that Jesus says your sins are forgiven so to prove he can forgive sins Jesus heals the man.

The Pharisees and teachers had come from every village, so Jesus is getting quite famous. (CKM)

What sticks out in the story is the determination of the people to get the sick person to Jesus and their faith which leads Jesus to forgive the man's sins. (MJ)

Does this mean that Jesus drew the direct cause of the sickness to the man's sin? (CKM)

Maybe he did it to stir the Pharisees up? (MJ) . . . Or he did it in response to the faith of others? (BM)

I still want to look at the possibility that Jesus saw the sick man and said your sins are forgiven so can we understand that Jesus saw sickness and sin as related. (CKM)

I don't think that would make a lot of sense. Jesus doesn't say to everybody he heals yours sin are forgiven so your sickness is healed. I think if you read the entire story you find Jesus may have said your sins are forgiven first to have a go at the Pharisees. (RF)

Jesus was not thought by the Pharisees to be in a position to forgive sins. (MJ)

I think the original hearers of the story would have understood the paralysis to be the effect of sin or at least to have seen sickness and sin to be associated. (CKM)

What does this story mean to us?

If you only read part of the story, verses 17-26, without the verses on either side of it, then you would say that the sin is the thing that is the cause of the sickness and that's the focus of the story. (CKM)

But you can't just read those verses without the others, Craig! (RF) . . . otherwise you could make a story mean anything if you just take bits of it. (RC)

An alternative reading, focussing on the conflict, is over who can forgive sins, not who can heal. Another aspect of the story we seem to be overlooking is the fact that Jesus healed the whole person, not just physically, but in talking about forgiveness, it's about total healing, the whole of the person is important, a total package. (RF)

It's difficult to appropriate its meaning for us today because we don't do healing and we don't normally forgive sins. (DM).

But we are in a position to forgive sins as it says later on in the story. (RF)

It is interesting why this story is in here, because there must be heap of cases where heaps of villagers were healed, but this is one where the specific story is related. So maybe it's important because its shows how the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law had particular ideas about what belonged to God, and what belonged to the religious leaders, and Jesus comes along and makes nonsense of it all as what he does leads to life anyway. (RC)

Maybe it's provocative because it includes both forgiveness of sins and healing at the same time. (DM)

It proves that Jesus could forgive sins in the act of healing, and the relationship between sin and sickness was a major component of the story, but that really doesn't relate to us today because we have a different understanding to sickness and sin. (CKM)

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY 21ST JUNE 1995

READERS: Steve Jago (SJ), Mary Jago (MJ), Craig Keeler-Milne (CKM), Jenny Keeler-Milne (JKM), Rex Fleming (RF), David McNamara (DM), Rowena Curtis (RC).

[The reading commenced at verse 27 of chapter 5 and the group read through to verse 11 in chapter 6.]

Verses 27-39

Characters: Jesus, Levi a Tax collector, a large crowd of tax collectors and others, the Pharisees and the scribes, and the disciples of Jesus.
Setting: The tax collectors office and then Levi's house.

The major plot of the story is that Jesus doesn't get a tax audit for a couple of years. (CKM)

It's about new wine into old wine skins. (JKM)

Jesus having a good time with the wrong type of people and the good people thinking it's a bit disgusting, that is the respectable people think it's disgusting. (RC)

The plot of the story is that Jesus is offering himself to people who were outside the religious mainstream (RF) . . . and he's trying to show them, those respectable people, that it is ok to have everybody as a part of the Kingdom (MJ) . . . and the

theme is summed up in verse 33 'I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance'. (RF)

Again I want to remind the group that we are reading the text and asking what does it mean today and if it says anything about society today. So far we haven't really addressed this at all. Maybe then we are saying that the stories don't really say anything to us?

Well one thing that's significant in the story is that when Jesus says follow me, Levi is in his office and in responding leaves everything in the context of his work place and follows Jesus. That's pretty radical. (JKM)

And after that the banquet was in Levi's house and was a big dinner, a big party, so Jesus must have liked good food and wine. (SJ)

I think you may be projecting yourself into the text! (MJ)

It is just Jesus at the banquet so how do the Pharisees and scribes get there? There must be a 'time difference' between the banquet and the arrival of the Pharisees and scribes. (CKM)

I don't see how that is important. Maybe the disciples and the Pharisees were somewhere outside when the complaining went on. (RF)

What does the story mean today?

Jesus wants us to accept outcasts and sinners, whereas other religious people wouldn't. (DM)

It seems this story does have a real meaning for today, because we have just received a letter from the Grafton Baptist Church which is saying that we shouldn't work or have anything to do with sex workers in our area, so this story says Jesus is interested in them and saying the exact opposite. So the Pharisees and scribes are still around today. (RF)

It certainly turns into a conflict story when you read verse 33 and Jesus' response. (JKM)

The attack continues on Jesus by the same people who compare his disciples with that of John the Baptist and the Pharisees, the difference being that they frequently fast and pray, but Jesus disciple's eat and drink. (CKM)

Partying on - actually indulging in the pleasures of life. (JKM)

Jesus is being accused of being a pretty poor leader here as well. (RC)

In fact he doesn't fit into their picture of being a leader at all. (SJ)

He's a glutton and a drunkard - not literally - but in their eyes. (DM)

What is Jesus' response?

Party while the bridegroom is still with you. (CKM)

It's interesting Jesus uses the elements of bread and wine for the Eucharist, because he is saying God's presence is something to celebrate in a material way, and that's the difference between Jesus and the Pharisees because they are so

caught up in their religious practice and otherworldly prayer that they can't grasp that God is in the material things of the world as well. (RF)

I think Jesus is saying there is a time for fasting and prayer, but not at the moment, it's a time for celebration as well. (JKM)

Then Jesus tells them a parable - what does it mean?

I think it may be a comparison between the Old and New Testaments between the old and new covenants. (RF)

I think it's about process. If you read it in light of verse 32 then maybe it's about the process of making the new wine into the old. (CKM)

Maybe it's saying something about having a go at the Pharisees and it is they who are the old coat and the old wineskins. (DM)

But he says the old is good. (CKM)

But not as far as garments is concerned - it says something about how an old order cannot see what is a new and exciting thing while to an outcast they see things with different eyes to those in the establishment, but the Pharisees could not in fact, they would tear themselves apart if they tried to do it. (DM)

That's like the Pharisees can't change - they can't see the new? (MJ)

Does it mean anything to our contemporary situation?

Sometimes the church doesn't move from its stance that it might have had twenty or thirty years and the church becomes immovable on certain issues. (SJ)

It also means taking something from another generation and trying to sew on to the new one which doesn't fit or match, and maybe that's why it is difficult for a past generation of Christians to feel comfortable in working with prostitutes. (DM)

I go back to the comparison in verses 31 and 32 and if the skins are the teachings then perhaps what Jesus is saying is that new wine is people coming to the teachings of Jesus which are new and the two cannot be put together. (CKM)

I think it's more like the comparison between a new order and an old order or a new teaching and an old teaching. Somehow it's just not understandable to the Pharisee because they are stuck in the old way. (DM)

Chapter 6: 1-11.

Characters: Jesus, the disciples, and the 'ever watching Pharisees'.
Setting: In a grain field.
Plot: The Pharisees criticise Jesus or his disciples because they are picking grain and eating it after rubbing it in their hands. But Jesus says its been done before and uses an example of David, although it's a bit different. And then Jesus says the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath which I guess means that the Sabbath was under God's control, or Jesus' control.

And what about the second story?

And then on another Sabbath Jesus is in a synagogue and he was teaching (MJ)

. . . and there is a man whose right hand is withered (CKM) .: . . and again the Pharisees were watching so they could have a go at Jesus, but Jesus knew their thoughts and tells the man whose hand is withered to stand up in front of all the people in the synagogue and turns and asks the Pharisees a question (RC) . . . what does the law allow you to do on the Sabbath - to do good or to do harm to save live or to destroy it? Two alternatives are offered, one to do harm and destroy, the other to do good and to save life (SJ) . . . . This is the alternatives offered in the context of the law - that is religious practice (SJ) . . . Are you saying everything that is part of religious practice and that includes instructions and everything, has this choice? (RF) . . . Jesus gives the answer to the question by putting into concrete action or practice the act of saving life and doing good. Jesus clearly shows what the alternatives are for the church today and what he understands to be the way of God. And he does it with his life giving actions - an act that does good. (RC)

The story was told on the Sabbath so the storyteller wanted this story to have even a greater impact in terms of religious choices available, because the law would suggest that on a Sabbath the man should not be healed. But Jesus points out that all religious observance should be put at the disposal and be determined by the actions of doing good and saving life. And he did it in the flesh. He took a man's arm and healed it! That's a very tangible and material thing to do. (RF) . . . It was not a spiritual practice! That's maybe why the Pharisees were filled with fury. (SJ)

The Pharisees have a very bad role in the story. (MJ)

They did not celebrate the healing and the doing of good and they got angry and plotted to do Jesus in. (SJ)

In fact this answers the question. They would, it seems, think it is appropriate for the 'law' about the Sabbath to be applied in such a way that they would destroy life and do bad. (RF)

Do any of these stories have anything to say to us today?

Yes, I can remember when I was taught to treat the Sabbath with superstition and the religious milieu suggested it was a day of what you could not do rather than what you could do. It's such Pharisaic religion and it's still around today. (RF)

I remember talking about BICM in a church once and telling them about the Sunday morning breakfast and I was asked the question 'why do you have to do that on a Sunday?' It was like surely you can feed the poor at some time other than Sunday - it was at odds with the idea of everyday being a celebration of life. (RC)

It's Jesus saying that the Sabbath should be an active day of doing good and saving life and not a passive day, which reminds me of the saying that evil is done when good people do nothing! (SJ).

It also reminds me of the teaching I had in my fundamentalist past, that you should only do good things for people who have repented, because if you do good works on the unrepentant you are wasting your time so you should only do it when they have made a faith commitment. That kind of thinking is exactly the same as saying you shouldn't do good to sinners, which is the opposite of what Jesus does in this story. (DM)

I think it's some pretty radical stuff that Jesus is saying and doing here and it makes us consider where we stand today in terms of our traditions and practices and how these lead to good and to life and the saving of life. (SJ)

It is in this very same chapter that Jesus teaches us to love our enemies which is such a radical statement as well. It really is turning things upside down. (RF)

There is a strong view in the church that God's love is selective and God only loves certain people in the church, but this story and what verse 32 says in chapter 5 shows that this view is very wrong and not at all the one Jesus is talking about. (DM).

[This was the last reading group in a series of six]

Readers : Sue Jennings (S), Rex Fleming (R), Steve Jago (SJ), Mary Jago(M), Rowena Curtis (RC).

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY JULY 31 1996

Let me remind us of what it is we are going to do in this reading group.

We will not read the story from the view of church dogma or doctrine that pre-determines our reading.

We will not read the story in order to deconstruct it or to make it meaningless.

We will read the story for our lives today. That is we will read the text in such a way as to bring it into relationship with the 'stories' of our own lives and our society.

We will not assume our reading is value neutral, but value laden. That is we will try, when relevant, to identify why we might, from the world in which we live today, interpret the text the way we do.

There are many different narratives, discourse or stories that make up the shape of reality today.

Some of these discourses or stories will be particular to our location. Others will be more global than local and some will have more influence upon us that others. Major stories of influence might be identified in our world today as 'Hollywood' and 'Free-Market Economics'. Within these overarching discourses we will find many personal stories which also make up the meaning of our lives.

The guidelines for our reading will be very simple.

Firstly we will read the text to see what it means for us today. Our recurrent question will be 'what does this story or text say to us today?' There is no 'right answer' in the context of this group - readers should feel total freedom to say what the text means to them, or what question the text answers for them, or if appropriate that the text is meaningless for them.

Secondly we will read the text in its final form as we have it today, so we will not be concerned with how it got put together - we will accept the integrity of the text as it stands.

Thirdly we will read the text and interpret it and ask questions of it as these questions emerge from our needs and experiences, and so we will read the text with the question 'what does the text say to the major stories and experiences of today'?

The reading process requires some commitments. A commitment to begin with contemporary reality as perceived by each member of the group, a commitment to read the text in community, that is together, and a commitment to read the text closely. We will do this with each text asking who are the characters, what is the setting and what is the plot, as the starting point in our discussion of the text or story.

This particular reading group will read the parables as they are found in the Gospel of Luke. As will become apparent parables cannot always be read in isolation from the text that surrounds them or in isolation from the whole story of the Gospel of Luke. You are encouraged to read the whole of the Gospel of Luke if you can.

Luke 6: 39 - 49

Parables seem to illustrate something that Jesus was teaching, which in this case follows on from the verses immediately before, which are about judging others and forgiving others. (SJ)

Verse 39.

It seems a bit obvious - a blind person can't lead a blind person. (S)

If you don't know where you are going, don't follow someone else who doesn't know where they are going. (SJ)

How do you know who is blind and who is not in the first place? (R)

The answer to the first question might be yes but the answer to the next question might be it's very dangerous. (S)

It seems it should just be taken literally and it makes a point about judging others. If you're blind yourself you can't lead someone else who is blind as well. (RC)

I think the answer to the first question is no. My experience with blind people is that it really can't happen. (M)

Today in our language it really means when we say that's the blind leading the blind that that person doesn't know what they are on about, simple as that. (SJ)

It has slight Monty Python characteristics. (R)

Verse 40.

Seems more like a saying than a parable. (R)

It means if you are being taught by a teacher you're not qualified but when you are fully qualified you are like the teacher. (SJ)

What I can't understand is why all these sayings are grouped together and lumped together in one paragraph. (R)

It seems to me that it is all stuck together and it is a bit disjointed. Me being an unlearned person reading it, but I'm sure some learned scholar would come along and tell me I was wrong - it looks disjointed. (SJ)

What gets me is that some of the kids that I have taught, have in fact taught me about things - like they could be from another culture and teach me things, but I'm a teacher. (RC)

Maybe that's true in the sense that today we do think we can learn from kids? (SJ)

The concept of open learning is much more common today. (S)

Verses 41- 42.

It's just such an extreme statement about a plank. It must be humour and it would make a great Monty Python skit. (SJ)

It's about contrasting something large and small. (S)

It's saying if you have a log in your eye there is no way you can see. (M)

If you have a log in your eye you have had a nasty accident. (SJ)

Jesus has to be using humour to make this point. (R)

And it makes plain sense to us today as it is and so it means simply be aware of your own shortcomings before you sprout off about others. (SJ)

I think too that if you can't see properly you have a distorted image, so you need to get your own focus back before you make judgements about others. (S)

That's why in counselling today you need to be very self aware unless you project your things onto others. (RC)

The irony is that the person doesn't even see the log in their own eye, even though they are judging the speck in someone else's eye. That's the saddest part of reality for us today. (S)

What kind of logs might we have in our eyes today?

Resentment, anger or unresolved issues. And it tends to be those who have not dealt with their own issues that are the most critical of others and often don't even realise this. (S)

Verses 43 - 45.

This story is one from an agricultural setting with two images a tree and fruit, and good and bad people. (R)

What does this mean?

It's about a good tree and a bad tree and the fruit they produce, and somehow connecting that with good and bad people, and so for me it's about how people will be known by their actions, what they produce - that's how you can tell a person is good from evil. (S)

Only the imagery relates to another kind of world to the one we live in. We would be more likely to use urban imagery, but more like ones we see in the city. (R)

Verses 46- 49.

Verse 46 sets the theme for the parable. (R)

It may not be necessary every time but let's discipline ourselves to look at the characters, setting and plot whenever we can to make sure we have read the story.

Characters : A man who knows how to build and one who doesn't.
Setting: Jesus is still preaching his sermon.

Plot : You need firm foundations for your building because if you don't have them your house could wash away.

I was thinking about this the other day. How in the world in which we live with all its pluralism, many people have very surface belief systems and don't have a firm grasp on what it is they believe in. Modern culture encourages people to have surface beliefs and run after every fad as it comes along. Even on the Olympics they have had huge adds with big emotional impact like the Buddhist monks or the Catholic Sisters. These adds seemed to have a spiritual content and they are adds for mobile 'phones! It devalues belief systems I think, and makes it all the more surface. (RC)

The product devalues the belief systems - its back to front. (R)

McDonalds does it as well. They take very important belief systems and trivialise them. (S)

It's showing people in our culture that it's very superficial. (RC)

It is saying you need a belief system that goes beyond the surface that is strong enough to withstand all the vagaries of life. (R)

If foundational things are not there as part of the building blocks of your life, then you'll go with the flow all over the place and get washed away. (M)

And it's the basis on which we believe things as well. I know people who become Christians and then something goes wrong for them and they say well Christianity is out the door, because they have a shallow belief, and think becoming Christian will solve it all - more magical than belief. (SJ)

That fits in with this because of the people who say 'Lord, Lord', so it might be teaching for new Christians. (RC)

New age teaching is very fluid - you can believe what you like - drop one belief for the other - so this is especially relevant for today and makes clear sense for us. (S)

What does it mean for us when a reading doesn't make sense. So far we seem to have been able to get through it but what do we do if it is just a big puzzle? (S)

We found that in the Redfern group and agreed that it would just have it remain a puzzle. (R)

Maybe there are some things which cannot be solved but not every one is comfortable with that. (SJ)

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY AUGUST 7 1996

Luke 8 : 4 -15.

This parable was well-known, but read it closely again in case we have assumed things about it.

Characters: The great crowd, the disciples, the sower, and the various types of soil that the seed lodges itself in.
Plot: The right conditions for growth.

Setting: An agricultural one and one that farmers would be familiar wit but one also we were familiar with.

I think it's well understood what the parable is about and we even get Jesus telling us but what I don't understand is the verses in the middle - verses 9 and 10. (M)

On face value it looks like it is the disciples that can crack the code but that other people are not meant to - one would expect Jesus to say I speak in parables so they might understand, but this is not what is said. (SJ)

If you read it literally it does say that some people will not be able to understand, but the disciples will. But it doesn't make sense of verse 9 when the disciples ask the question and don't understand, but they are supposed to. (S)

I guess the possibility might be they understand the things of the Kingdom but not the parables - the other possibility is they . . . (R)

But it could be Jesus being quite cynical here, and the irony is that it is in fact the disciples who should see it but they don't, they still have such a blind spot. (S)

But why would Jesus not tell a complex parable - this one is simple? (R)

It is very confusing, because at the end of the first part of the parable Jesus says 'If you have ears to hear then hear', which suggests that there will be people in the crowd that will understand it. But then the disciples don't understand it, but it is the people other than the disciples who are not meant to understand it so it is all very confusing. (RC)

What I'm saying is that Jesus is referring to his disciples and that they missed it, not that people in general should not understand. But that it is ironic that the ones who should don't. (S)

Could it be the difference between knowing and understanding. I mean we know about a lot of things, like cars or computers, but we don't really understand how they function. (SJ)

It is very confusing and difficult to understand how the bits around it makes sense. (RC)

Maybe that's the thing - it is an explanation this time because the disciples are so thick and can't understand. (S)

On there own do the verses mean anything to us today or can they mean anything to us today?

It all depends how you understand the words Kingdom of God? And what the secrets are? But I don't have a straight answer to that. (R)

In our language today I don't think it makes sense. It's tricky because if it said 'values' rather than 'secrets' it might make more sense. (RC)

My New Revised Standard Version has a notation that says a variant translation was 'mysteries'. That might be a slightly better way of understanding what it means. (S)

I agreed that mysteries is better as they are something you don't necessarily understand. (M)

But I think you need to deal with this passage even if it does not make complete sense, because it is central to the next part of the parable, because when Jesus finishes the parable with 'if you have ears to hear then hear' it's like a closure of it all and it is only because of the disciples asking the questions that there is need for Jesus to go on in the next bit of explanation. At the minimum they didn't know when they should have. (S)

I just don't get the second half of verse 10. (SJ)

It is Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah. Maybe it is they simply don't understand rather than a definite I don't want them to understand - but you can't get that from the text. (R)

But why would Jesus tell the parable to a great crowd if they were not meant to understand? Jesus constantly teaches the parables to people who are ordinary everyday people. (RC)

So it can't mean what it says at face value. (S)

The quote from Isaiah is very interesting. It's from chapter 6 verse 9 and it's different to what is in Luke and it's about a state of mind in a way - they can't hear or see even when its plain in front of them. (SJ)

Could it be an explanation by the person writing Luke, about why people didn't understand in the first century? But that's not evident from the text is it? (R)

I think we can conclude that the verses do not make sense completely, especially the last part of verse 10., and we should leave the discussion at that and to look at what the parable means in our context today. (RC)

I'm happy with that - we could spend all night on it. (SJ)

[General agreement]

It's a very accurate description of what happens today when people hear about the good news and have different responses. It is exactly like it says. I could give you names of people to go with each example. (SJ)

It is imagery easy to understand and it makes sense today. (S)

You only have to think back to any youth group in a church and see how the seed of the gospel ended up being planted and whether it took root or not. (M)

What in our contemporary context could we identify as good fruit, or a good crop or bearing fruit?

To become a Baptist minister. (SJ)

[Great laughter]

An alternative way to deal with it is what are the rocks and the thorns? If we name them today it could be tragedy, cares of the world, riches and other concerns like power - it's not hard to name them today. (R)

It seems that bearing good fruit is the things that are consistent with the Kingdom of God - living by Kingdom values. (S)

What are these values?

Loving people who are tough to love . . . (RC) Fighting for justice and standing up for truth . . .
(R) Caring about people's needs and doing something practical, loving God, seen in the way you live by caring more for other people than just yourself.

Luke 10: 25-37.

This is hardly a new parable. (M)

I have heard it preached on many times and read it since Sunday school. (RC)

We should read it again though as we have found reading it carefully might lead us to see something we haven't read before. Isn't that right Andrew? (M)

Well let's read it.

[The text was read audibly.]

Why don't we have a go at putting it in our context a bit like we did with the story of the woman in Simon's house in the Women's Group? (M)

The group together retold the parable as follows:

A person was walking from Kings Cross down to Woolloomooloo and fell into the hands of robbers who rolled her, beat her up and went away leaving the person half dead. Now by chance a Baptist minister was going down the same road and when he saw the woman beaten up and half dead he crossed the road and went on his way quickly. A solicitor was also going the same way but when he saw the woman he crossed the road as well and avoided having to even step over her, and he hurried away. But an Aboriginal person on his way down from Kings Cross to Woolloomooloo saw the woman beaten and half dead and felt really sorry for her. So he stopped and ripped up his T-shirt to use as bandages and some of his whisky to wash away the blood from the wounds, and he picked her up on his back and took her to Matthew Talbot and asked them to break the rules and let a woman in to the sick bay so she could be cared for and they agreed and took her in. The next day he came back with his pension cheque and gave it to the staff and said make sure she gets a good place to stay and if you find out where she ends up, if it costs more than that I will make up the difference with my next pension cheque. Which one of these three people, the Baptist minister, the solicitor or the Aboriginal acted like the kind of person Jesus says we should be like? The answer is the one who showed mercy - it's the Aboriginal. Jesus said go and do the same.

It certainly has more impact when you tell the story in our own context. (S)

Like the Samaritan, indigenous people do not have a good profile in the inner city and are generally seen to be homeless and drunk. But in reality we could all point to indigenous people by name in Woolloomooloo, who in the most simple ways care for each other, while the respectable folks ignore the need they see around them. (RC)

The context in which the parable was told, that is the question of the lawyer in verse 25, and the answer of Jesus, makes it clear that belief, and the practice of that belief, must go together, and that even those least expected can show us how

to practice the kind of love of God and love of neighbour that Jesus requires. It's a very clear this worldly example of how to achieve eternal life. (S)

We have done a role reversal as well because the people we tend to write off, is the hero of the story. The person we would normally see as hopeless or unclean or not acceptable, is the hero. (R)

The story would have been confronting then and it is still confronting to us today. (M)

Telling the story for us today has allowed a well-known text to be heard again in our context and it is a powerful teaching of what it means to be Christian today. And it's about the practice of love of God and neighbour - it's not enough to know what is the right thing to do - you've got to do it. The meaning for today is self evident in the parable. (S)

Could this passage be used by modern evangelists to let people now about eternal life? I mean is this parable the answer to the question 'how do I become a Christian'?

Well, yes it could I suppose. (R)

[General agreement]

But I can't ever remember it being used that way. (S)

It's part of the right answer with a specific example - so it could be that loving God was an interior thing, but love of neighbour required an example. I mean it still talks about an interior response and then provides an example of what this means. (SJ)

The simple acts of calling Missionbeat, or picking up some one in the 'Loo who is drunk or lost, is exactly what this parable is about. That is love of God. But you won't hear anything like that from an evangelist who will only emphasise the faith bit. (R)

Like I said before it's not enough to know what is the right thing to do you got to do it. So it is about faith in action. And it is love of self as well, so maybe we need to ask what it is like to be the person beaten up and who will minister to us. (S)

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY AUGUST 14 1996

Luke 11: 1-13. The parable to be considered was in verses 5 - 8.

Characters: Three different people all called friends.
Setting : A friend's house.
Plot: Friends and late nights.

A person goes to a friend's house to borrow three loaves of bread because that person has a friend who has turned up unexpectedly and he has nothing to give him to eat. And it's midnight. (S)

From within the house the friend within tells him to go away. (M)

And they are all in bed and for some reason he can't get up and give him anything. (SJ)

And then Jesus says he won't get up because he is a friend, but he will get up if he keeps persisting by knocking and calling out. (M)

And then at the end of the parable Jesus says some wonderful things. Seek and you'll find, knock and the door will be opened to you, ask and you'll get it. Not like you've got ears and you're not going to hear and eyes and you're not going to see. This time it's much more encouraging. (RC)

And it's everyone who asks, not just some - it's everyone. (S)

In my version it says that the gift that will be given is the Holy Spirit so maybe that's the key to the passage. (R)

What's the holy spirit?

That's the fifty four thousand dollar question isn't it! (R)

It's that facet of God which is the comforter - the presence of God with us today - the helper. (SJ)

Or the spirit of truth. There are many descriptions of the Holy Spirit in the Bible so you could take your pick really. (R)

In another Gospel doesn't it say good gifts instead than the Holy Spirit? (S)

[The parallel passage was consulted in Matthew and John]

Matthew and Luke do not have the same about what God will give, Holy Spirit and good gifts, although maybe they are the same thing in that good things come from the Holy Spirit. (S)

But the parable is not so much about good gifts or asking for good gifts. It is about persistence - being persistent. (SJ)

What does it mean today?

It is a contrast between what earthly parents give their kids and what God gives. (R)

A parent gives appropriate gifts and God does the same even more so. (M)

Does what Matthew says help us understand what Luke is saying or how does it relate to what Luke is saying?

Well only that he's chosen to interpret it or add a different emphasis to what Luke has done. (S)

If you link it with verse 3, our daily bread, it's asking for practical gifts for daily life as well as the Holy Spirit. (RC)

What does it mean, if anything, for us in today's contemporary world? Does it mean anything to us today?

It says to me that we shouldn't have an attitude that I won't bother God with this and that we take the trouble to ask God and be persistence and God will respond. (SJ)

Part of my worry about it is if I was reading about it in the context of where I am in ministry, then what the text promises and the reality of what happens in people's lives doesn't always equate. People do ask and they don't seem to get a response in a way. Sometimes it seems you ask God for good things and it doesn't happen. (S)

I find great encouragement in that God has never ever or at least rarely answered my prayers immediately, and it has only been in the fullness of time that I have become aware of how God has answered. (SJ)

So if you're persistent with God you'll probably get it. (S)

No, not necessarily get what you asked for, but you will get something appropriate. (SJ)

Although earlier on the guy got what he wanted because he was persistent - how does that make sense? (S)

Well that's a good response from God. (SJ)

But some people in Woolloomooloo do ask for a break in life and get a scorpion. (S)

Even from their fathers. (RC)

So what are we saying - how would we say what this text is saying today in our context?

If you persist in your prayer God will answer with something appropriate. In terms of the whole Gospel story God can only give us something that is affirming of life. God won't give us scorpions. Day to day living might throw that up for people but that doesn't come from God. (M)

I think it says what it says and would be the same today. (S)

Well unfortunately we have the background of other things having been said to us, one of which is 'ask according to God's will', which is in my mind. (SJ)

It's something we have read in Scripture from other sources but I don't know where - ask anything in my name and it will be given. (R)

In God's will is different to God's name. (SJ)

In John it says 'if you abide in me and I abide in you ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you'. (S)

That's why it is dangerous for someone who is not a Christian to pick up this text in isolation and think, beauty I want a car or a pushbike or a house or whatever. (SJ)

They throw it at you. (M)

So it is helpful to have other Scripture to put it in context - it's the danger of just reading a bit at a time. But if you were to take this in terms of what it alone says, it means anybody can rock up to God and ask and if they persist enough they will get it and that's the danger of reading this in isolation as a text in its own right. (SJ)

Although the guard is, it is good gifts. (M)

If you add the end on it's not as bad but if you just take the parable by itself you have problems. (M)

I think the good gifts is the qualifying thing. It is about good gifts and like it says in another passage, God wants to give us the desires of our hearts, so it is ok to think it is God's wish to give us good things whatever form this takes - it is not just material things or possessions. (S)

It must be beyond that because I have been with really poor people in the Philippines who have a relationship with God and ask God for things but it is not just the material - although that doesn't justify the poverty. (M)

I don't think I have ever prayed for material things - things like patience and insight is more like it. (S)

Anything that is Christ like - God wants to give us. (M)

But my struggle is I don't think it is only spiritual stuff this is about. The gifts are real ones - material ones and I think that is important to God as well. (R)

Well it is a friend asking a friend so it is asking within a relationship - it's not outside of that kind of relationship. I can't go to a neighbour that I don't have a good relationship with and ask for something. I would get a really rough reception, so it needs to be understood it is in that context we ask for the things we need not the things we want. My version says give us day by day the food we need not the food we want. If we are in God's will, its needs that fit in, not wants. (SJ)

Luke 11 : 14 - 23

Is this a parable or more like another sort or teaching of Jesus? (S)

I guess the parable may be said to be in verses 21- 22.

Jesus was casting out a demon and some of the people in the crowd says he is doing it by the power of demons and Jesus says how can this be . . . that can't be, it is by the power of God. (S)

The language in my version is very strong with 'every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert', and house falls on house. (SJ)

That's very true today! Think about how many wars today are in divided countries and what is happening to these countries as they lay waste to their country. They ruin their crops, their infrastructure, their houses are destroyed - it is exactly what it says. (RC)

I think that is true of any organisation as well. Like us at BICM - if we are divided from within it would lay waste to us. (S)

A very strong image and one of warning. (M)

What about the strong man?

The implication is that someone who is strong thinks he has lots of power and is very secure but then one that is stronger comes in and takes away everything and the implication is that Jesus is stronger than Satan and can take away all of his

reign. If you're standing with what is evil and you think you are safe, beware, because God's power is stronger. (S)

It's about the two kingdoms - one of evil and one of God's. (M)

Does it mean the same today?

Well I was just thinking that today you can have a pocket of corruption and evil like the police that have been exposed by the Wood Royal Commission and they think they are secure and can't be touched and they have built walls around them and then the Royal Commission comes along and they are scattered. (RC)

It's like the situation where Marty has been attacked, but in the end she has been shown to have the integrity - so it's not about power, it's about integrity and truth. (S)

So what you are saying is that in the end God's power of truth and justice will come through like in South Africa, but it is also about being active and proactive in our fight for justice. (S)

I am worried that this image propagates the myth that might is right and that is not the truth. (SJ)

Well it's not of power its of right. (S)

But the language is very militaristic. (SJ)

It is a danger because it lends itself to an interpretation of the global policemen like the United States who keep order by the strength of their military might but the gospel is not about might and power and strength its about a humility and a weakness. You know, in my weakness I am strong. It's that counter culture that speaks of something very different. (R)

It's also interesting that when they asked for a sign Jesus gives them an example rather than a show of strength. (M)

Does Jesus cast out demons today ?

A practical example is a friend of mine who had a satanic background who has had demons cast out from her. I've seen it myself and it is not a schizophrenic condition - it was real for me and her, and I know it gets out of hand the way people use this stuff, but God has had a victory in her life and it is real, so she has been delivered from the reality of demons. It is evidence of God being in the world today and I don't know how you can explain it differently to it being a transcendent thing of God. (S)

These demons are identified with individual people and manifest themselves in that way. Are demons manifested at any other level?

I kind of think of South Africa as being a real exorcism of evil but on a grander scale. But a real exorcism of demonic evil all the same. (R)

Evil is anything that stops a person being whole and that includes all sorts of illness and all the way up to the structural political system - it's the same thing on a grand scale. (S)

I do think there is a difference between psychiatric illness and deliberately using a kid - like Leah - in satanic worship and related stuff. It's a choice for evil and it is a clear choice. (M)

I think some people are scared of the spiritual world but I think we should not be any more scared of it because we have this story. (S)

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY AUGUST 21 1996

Luke 12: 4 - 34 was read. The parable to be considered was verses 16 - 21.

Characters: A rich man and God.
Setting: On a farm.
Plot: A rich man has a very good crop and does not have anywhere to store it so he builds bigger barns and stores all the crops and feels secure and says, 'eat, drink and be merry' - in fact says, 'soul, relax, eat, drink and be merry' but God says 'fool you're dead' - you looked after yourself only so you're greedy and not rich towards God. (SJ)

What does it mean today?

Probably something about gathering possessions and neglecting a relationship with God. Taking no risks in the material sense? (SJ)

Don't invest all your time in economic security as you may have no guarantee about the future. So possessions are not really worth much in the long run. It reminds us of the transient nature of life - there are no guarantees. (M)

Rich people die like anybody else. (R)

I think the person in the story was already rich but there is no sense of him saying in the story what am I going to do for anyone else? He seems to just think of himself and there is no acknowledgment of the needs of others or God. He could have filled his existing barns and then given the rest to the poor, but no it seems he just wants it all for himself. (RC)

This is a very difficult parable for us today in our culture as it is all about getting riches and being materially secure and balancing the budget and keeping the economy on track - this goes against the whole thrust of politics that is around. In this place it is about building bigger and bigger barns. So it's difficult to know where to draw the line. How much is enough? (R)

Well in some ways the parable does say how much is enough because it was not wrong to have crops, it was what he chose to do with the excess crops he had - how he chose to use the crops. (M)

Reminds me of all the holes in the ground around the inner city - the building sites begun by the rich in the late eighties, like Bond Tower, that is still an empty hole in the ground. People wanting to build bigger and bigger barns. (SJ)

The whole thrust of life is centred around money, money and more money. We are here to make money and life is a quest for that so in practice it is harder to live a different lifestyle. (R)

For us today though there seems to be some middle ground between this story where people say I will do nothing and God will provide, and where Paul says if you don't work you don't eat. I'm not sure if this parable says you need to have

some crops but you have to know how to use the crops properly. And like it says in verse 15 that is not to be greedy. (SJ)

It's a context in which you have, but hedonism is not the guiding principle. (M)

What about the justice aspect of the parable? He is simply giving more and more to himself. It is not wrong to have things, Jesus went to parties and made sure there was enough wine, and food for five thousand people, so essentially it is not wrong to have the material things we need to live our lives, but it is what we do with the abundance of what we have. What is enough? This parable says think about it. (RC)

It's easy to understand but it's harder to know how we are to apply it today. (R)

This guy has made two choices that God thinks is foolish. The rich guy thinks he's clever but God thinks he is foolish. He misses out because he thinks he will have all the crops forever but he misses the point and thinks his security is in material goods, but they are limited in their availability anyway. (SJ)

The issue is selfishness. He might have given some work to some people to build the barns but it was for his own gain anyway. The thing is to enjoy life now and give away what you have to give and do it now while you are alive - it is very much about what you do here and now. (Mary)

It's very applicable because everything today is centred around economics and not people. Take the example of overseas aid in the budget. Cut to shreds. We, like a wealthy country, say we have to balance the budget, build bigger and bigger barns or only give aid that benefits us. (R)

It's certainly about greed and what we do with the things we have. Being rich towards God implies being rich towards your neighbour. (RC)

Luke 12: 35 - 48

The first parable was identified as being in verses 35 - 38.

Characters: Slaves/servants, the master.
Setting: In the master's house.
Plot: The master has been to a wedding and is returning and has to knock on his own door to get in and for those slaves who are alert and let him in there will be a role reversal and the master will be their servant.

Why doesn't he have his own key? (M)

In our terms it's like when the boss goes out to lunch and suddenly returns and has to use the security system to get back in, and finds one of the office staff alert who lets him in and so takes the office staff out to lunch. In that sense there is a role reversal. (SJ)

Shouldn't it be the boss becomes the office staff and the office staff becomes the boss - isn't it an even more radical reversal? (R)

This possibly alludes to Jesus' return and our being prepared for it. The problem is what does it mean to be prepared? (RC)

Could it be people putting off their relationship with God? (M)

Verses 39 - 40

Characters: Owner of the house and a thief.
Setting: The owner's house.
Plot: If the owner of a house knows when a burglar is going to break in, then he will be ready for the burglar and the burglary will not happen.

Again it seems to be saying the same thing and this is verified in verse 40 - we don't know when Jesus is coming again but we need to be aware of this possibility and live life like that was going to happen. (M)

Verses 41- 48

Characters: The disciples who are addressed, then in the story itself the master, manager and the slaves.
Setting: A property, the master's house.
Plot: A master puts a manager in charge of the business and goes away and then the manager is really bad and mistreats the staff, and when the master returns unexpectedly the bad manager will be cut off and put with the unfaithful. (SJ)

Mine says cut to pieces. (R)

It's very vicious. (M)

Because the manager is so bad and mistreating the staff so badly he cops it sweet - although it is a bit scary what happens. (SJ)

I don't think it's meant to be taken literally. That's why some translations only say 'cut off' which could mean given the sack. (R)

Well it goes on to say if the manager does this knowingly then he will be punished big time; if he does it because he is ignorant, then he will not get such a punishment. (SJ)

The emphasis on corporal punishment and even capital punishment reflects the context in which it was written. I'm not sure how relevant it is or applicable today - we do have Unions you know. (R)

This image of the master being God, if that's how some people read it, is too harsh and doesn't fit with other images of how God deals with people. It is a contradiction of the others. (RC)

Maybe it is just hyperbole. (SJ)

Maybe it's so harsh because it is aimed at the disciples and Jesus is trying to get them to understand what is going on. In fact we know from last week's reading the disciples have been entrusted with the secrets of the kingdom so maybe the harshness is aimed at the disciples particularly - so the last bit in verse 48. But in verse 46 throws in unbelievers as well. (M)

So Christians will be judged more harshly than others about the way they treat people in the world? (R)

I'm not sure it means that exactly. (M)

[Silence]

So what does it say to the church today?

If your lives don't match your professed belief then look out - your words must match your actions. (SJ)

And when we see things in our lives that need change we should change them. (M)

Are we allegorising here? I mean can God really be like the master? (R)

I think we need to be reminded that God will punish those who do what the manager did, whoever they are. Those who beat others and oppress them and then have a good time themselves, will be punished by God who does have retribution for people like this. (SJ)

I think it is a particularly repugnant image of God, or punishment, or anything like that today. I can only think it is as strong a warning as Jesus could give to those who will carry on his work. You're meant to know what the Kingdom means, so be faithful and wise, and do what is right and just - don't sin against others, don't abuse others, if you do you will be judged! (RC)

Well the parable is not universalistic is it. It does say those who chose not to do the things of God will also chose to be punished as God doesn't accept disobedience. (SJ)

Maybe it's about church leaders who discriminate and oppress those for whom they are responsible. Maybe it is a warning to them in the strongest possible terms not to mistreat those they have responsibility for. (M)

It does set high expectations of the disciples and high expectations of the church to live by what it says it believes. Maybe it is a parable for the church only rather than having any wider application. (RC)

The term to cut him to pieces today would be a real dressing down with words I think, or at least a public exposure of the one who has been so unjust. (SJ)

I think it is a parable for the church today! It says to the leaders in the church - do not oppress any of your people or mistreat them. If you do then the judgement you receive from God because you did know what was required of you will be harsher than those who are in your care. (M).

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 4, 1996

Luke 14: 8-11.
Characters: The host, the person who is invited, a person who is 'more important'.
Setting: A wedding banquet.
Plot: When you go to a banquet you don't go and sit in the place of most honour because there might be a more honoured guest - you'll get booted out of your seat! But if you're humble and sit in the lowest seat then you might get invited to sit in a place of more honour.

A modern day parallel is if you go to a wedding you don't sit in the brides seat! (SJ)

What does it mean and why would Jesus tell us this story today?

Well don't have illusions about your importance, but be more humble. (SJ)

Don't make assumptions about where you think you should be - like being chosen for something or not making assumptions about your importance. (S)

Do we have places of honour today?

We do at weddings. (M)

So are we saying this is simple direct easy to understand with direct application today?

Yes - you could apply it to a wedding and someone could sit themselves inappropriately and someone comes up and says you need to move. (RC)

Maybe it's about going to church and not sitting in the seat of importance. It's a different thing in Woolloomooloo but in some churches people do have a place they always sit which identifies it as honour. (S)

Like member's boxes at the football. (RC)

I think it may also be about thinking about other people, considering others also. (S)

It's like at fun runs when people try to get to the front of the line and push their way through at the expense of others (SJ) . . . And an official then comes along and put them back from the front and put seasoned people ahead of them (M) . . . And in ceremonies as well there is protocol as well. (SJ)

Verse 11 - how does it sit with the way we understand the market place or economics or capitalism?

Well I think the way that is at the heart of God is a reversal to the way we function in the marketplace. We esteem those who are the rich - if you've got money and power you're the one who gets the box at the football and I think it's saying that in the Kingdom that's not the way it's meant to be, you know it's a reversal of what the world says is important. (R)

So it's a parable of reversal?

Yes. (M)

[General agreement].

It's also about hospitality and giving people access to a safe place, and things like that as well, a place of equality where other people can be welcomed. (S)

This parable doesn't say there isn't a place of honour does it? (M)

Well it says don't take the place of honour. (SJ)

Well actually it seems to go on to suggest that it may well be the crippled and the poor and the blind that have the place of honour. (S)

This teaching of Jesus does not readily make sense today because if you are going to have a party then you would invite your friends. I don't see too many

people throwing a party and inviting with psychiatric problems. I mean maybe parties were different when Jesus told the story. (R)

Maybe more like a business dinner where you do what you do to impress or show others your status or position in the company or society. (SJ)

Its got to be about motives and including the people who would not usually get included and why you include someone or why you exclude someone. (S)

You need to invite people from the fringes and they can't invite you back. (SJ)

Our context in Woolloomooloo however is inclusive of street people, drug addicts and people with psychiatric problems, and the effect they have upon people who visit our work who are not part of the community is enormous. (RC)

Jesus then he goes on to tell the parable in verses 15 - 24 which some of us have written into a contemporary play and been a part of so we know it well. However we will read the parable again and see if there are any further aspects that we uncover for us today.

Characters: The host, many who were invited, slave, the property owners or the three people who refuse, then the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame and the people in the lanes.
Setting: A great dinner or banquet.
Plot: A person gives a great party or dinner and invites a group of people who refuse to come as they say they are too busy with things, and so the host gets people from the streets and lanes of the town and invites them instead and they are the people who obviously wouldn't normally be invited, like people who are poor, lame and blind and it seems to end up go and get whoever you can.

A bit like our church - go and get anybody you can from the streets. (RC)

Well it's about God's Kingdom, as the opening verse in the story says, so it is Jesus saying, this is how it is in the Kingdom of God and those who eat bread in the Kingdom are the ones who are poor, blind and live in the streets, because the others are too busy. The implication that the ones who live in the streets, or the irony of it is, that they are the ones who are blessed. I think like you preached at Woolloomooloo Andrew - it is the street kids and the prostitutes up at Kings Cross that will be in the Kingdom. (S)

That sermon did contain historical background material didn't it, but it was all the more apparent it had a contemporary meaning especially in our context. (R)

Yes it was using a social scientific approach in historical terms and was based specifically on Richard Rohrbaugh's article on the first century city. Can we read it without that historical material or is it not possible?

Well you can. The implication is the same - it's the streets and lane ways and alleys (S & M) . . . it does build up the picture that those invited were people of importance but they couldn't come, so it then turns to invite the poor of society first in the streets and then in the lanes. (S)

We make a conscious effort to invite people in Woolloomooloo straight off the street. (M)

But not because others wouldn't come. (SJ)

But when we had that mother's day service and Fielieda had invited so many people around Woolloomooloo and nobody came, or very few came and afterwards everyone we saw we invited to morning tea and gave them a flower. (M)

We had an excess of flowers and food but it was all taken. (SJ)

If this is a parable of the Kingdom of God, which we said last week was the place where God's values are or God's people are, and Steve said part of that would include the church, so if this is a parable of the Kingdom, what does it mean?

I think its overall message is about everyone having the opportunity to belong. I don't think it is just about some were invited and others were not. The emphasis is on equal access, no matter who you are or where you live and it is the way it is in Woolloomooloo where we have people from Epping Baptist and street people from

Kings Cross and any other church, and all are made to be welcome, so it's about inclusion. (S)

This parable does take on real life implications for the church today. (RC)

Luke 14: 25-33, specifically verses 28-32.

I want to raise the question as to whether this was a parable or some form of wisdom teaching. (SJ)

It looks a bit more like a parable, or a couple of parables or stories, to make a point. (R)

Well it's about the cost of following Jesus. When you build a tower you sit down and estimate the cost before you start to make sure you can finish, and if you're going to go to war then you sit down and work out if you have the resources to win. So if you want to be Jesus' disciple you have to look at whether you can hang in there. (S)

I think it is important that we look at the difference between believing and being a disciple. I don't think it costs much to believe but it costs heaps to be a disciple. (SJ)

I think particularly the war one, that the cost is great as someone could get hurt or it could cost you your life. (S)

It's a very difficult thing if you took all of this literally, like hate your father and mother and give up everything. (SJ)

Does it say hate in that version, because this one says 'whoever comes to me cannot be my disciple unless he loves me more than', and then lists the others and that's very different to hate them. (M)

[At this point of the discussion Toby aged 12 years entered the room and overhearing the discussion stated he did not understand why Jesus would say something like this - why can't you love them all the same - love Jesus and your mother as well?]

That's a good question Toby. I think Jesus is using strong language. I don't think it's meant to be taken literally. It's strong by overemphasising how much it is going to cost. It's not just some easy joy ride - it will actually cost you something. It might

mean you'll have to put others before yourself or it might mean that to follow Jesus is not something simplistic and easy. He's using language that is to put emphasis on it rather than literally saying this is how it has to be. (S)

It's like plucking your eye out as well. (RC)

It's just contrary to what Jesus was on about anyway - he was on about loving people and he was about preserving not destroying the body, so if we read something so contrary we need to look for another message there. (SJ)

And giving up all your possessions. I don't think it means give away everything that we have, but the implication is that's how radical it is to give up everything to follow Jesus. (S)

Sometimes we say things in a very shocking and affronting way to get a point across and I think that's what Jesus is doing here - almost an exaggerating style. (SJ)

And I think you're right when you say it's not just enough to believe - that that belief has to work itself out in action - it's not just about believing it it's about doing it. (M)

It makes a lot more sense in the translation that says 'love me more', than in the one that says 'hate'. (SJ)

If this seems to be a contradiction in the overall story we have read so far, how do we feel about this?

Ok because contradictions in the text can't go against the nature of God - like love your enemies - this by itself doesn't make sense - it can't mean hatred. (S)

To hate someone is to wish someone bad so it can't mean that. (RC)

Does it mean to hate the importance of a relationship in preference to the importance of a relationship with God, maybe a fine distinction? (SJ)

Well it is about priorities and I think it is saying the priority is to follow Jesus, and that might cost because you might have to give up some of the other things that get in the way. (S)

I think the bit about building the tower is interesting because we have all those holes in the ground where people have done exactly what this says. They haven't counted the cost and gone ahead with great big billion dollar plans and have a huge hole in the ground and can't finish the project. (RC)

And the result is just rubbish and rubble and nothing is achieved, so it's like if you don't count the cost then we never achieve what we are meant to be, and all that will be left in your life is rubbish and rubble. (S)

That's a good point. It's sort of like that potential in following Jesus - God wants us to reach our full potential, but if we don't and if we are not aware, that's going to mean some big changes for us, sacrifices and all that sort of thing. Then you're right, we don't reach the potential that God has for us, which is good. So it's seeing it all in a more positive light than the actual hating business. (RC)

The examples in the middle are fairly simple to understand?

Yes. [General agreement]

Sometimes these verses don't seem to go together very well. It's like tack-ons or out of place - at the beginning of Chapter 14 it all follows on the same theme, but here it all seems out of place. (RC)

READING GROUP SEPTEMBER 18 1996

Luke 15 - 16 :13

Verses 1-7

Characters: The sheep, whoever looks after the sheep - in this case the 'one of you ' has to be the Pharisees and the scribes, friends and neighbours.
Setting: Obviously in a field somewhere [agreed it did not really matter].
Plot: A shepherd loses one of his hundred sheep, so he goes looking for it and when he finds it he has a great celebration - in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous who don't need to.

What specific meaning do you think this has as a story for you today?

The value of one, in that one person is important to God and in fact one person here is more valuable than ninety-nine, which might have something to say to modern day evangelistic efforts. (S)

And there is great joy in heaven - in fact there is a lot of rejoicing here firstly with neighbours and friends and then in heaven - a lot of celebration. (RC)

Does the story give you any idea who the righteous persons might be?

A bit like that other parable when he was talking to the Pharisees. I think he was having a go at the same group of people. (S)

Is this offensive?

I assume the ninety-nine had no need of repentance because they had already repented? (SJ)

So what meaning would that give it?

It's more important coming into the Kingdom than being in the Kingdom (SJ) [laughter] . . . you're no longer special? (M) . . . Now that is offensive! (RC)

Well who are the righteous today?

Well it depends what slant you read it with. There are two ways to take that statement. Firstly in the way Steve said or you could take it in the way that righteous people don't think they need repentance and they think they have got it made. (S)

We often use the word self-righteous. (SJ)

But think about the audience that Jesus was talking too. They would have been the people who thought they were righteous - self -righteous Pharisees. (M)

I think you can pick it up from the story itself. They were complaining about what Jesus was doing so we could expect it was them that Jesus was referring to. (S)

I'm surprised at the statement. I thought that everyone needed to repent. (SJ)

So it must be sarcasm (M) . . . Yes I think so (S) . . . That was Sondra's reaction as well to what we read in the Women's group last week, Jesus was being sarcastic. (M)

Does the parable make sense and is it easy to understand?

Yes. [General agreement]

So what does it mean today?

There is great rejoicing when Rebel, our local sex-worker and drug addict comes to church with her dogs and the fact we can actually keep on going with our worship (RC) . . . without rushing for the soap and hot water. (SJ)

And when she takes communion I think maybe there is rejoicing in heaven although most churches probably would have a fit. (M)

I think that's so true. We would be condemned by the modern day Pharisees and she wouldn't get into most churches with her dogs (S) . . . They would be running to the door to keep her and the dogs out, trying to keep her talking at the door. (M)

I also think there would be great rejoicing about Rebel coming to church than there being a hundred sitting in church (SJ) . . . That's a very good point (RC) . . . And she wouldn't get into a church with a hundred, she would normally be a rank outsider. (SJ)

It's also interesting to think how it must be for Rebel as she has taken a big risk to come into church. We take it so easy, for us who go often the risk factor is low, but it is risky for some to come in. (RC)

David from Street Church had to come and check things out before he could come inside the Op Shop for church - in fact he came to morning tea a couple of times first (M) . . . It's quite a hard thing for some (SJ) . . . And now he's the first sitting down - in fact David and Betty are the first in! (RC)

Verses 8-10

Characters: A woman and a coin, neighbours and friends, and 'angels of God'.
Setting: In her house.
Plot: The woman looses a coin, looks for it and when she finds it she has a party.

She probably spends the coin she finds on the party! (SJ)

Does it mean the same thing as the parable before?

I see in it the effort that she uses in finding the coin. She sweeps the house, lights the lamp and searches until she finds it, so there is an effort involved in this one, even just for the one coin and so it is today with the Rebel's of this world - it takes effort to care for the one. (S)

It wasn't the attitude of saying I have nine left so the one doesn't matter, it was still important to find the one lost, and I see that as being a matter of proportion. So if

you have a dollar and you loose ten cents, you probably wouldn't bother, but if you had a hundred and lost ten you would bother. (SJ)

Well, what are the coins worth in the story? We don't know? (RC)

In my Bible there is a footnote that says a coin in the Greek was a drachma worth about a day's wage for a labourer. (M)

So it was a lot of money. (RC)

It must have been important what Jesus was trying to get across as he repeats it. (S)

Ok in this context, where Jesus is addressing the Pharisees and scribes who have been grumbling about him and his behaviour, he goes on to tell a parable that we all probably know very well?

Luke 15: 11 - 32

[It was agreed this was a well-known parable.]

I remember this parable was always told to me in the context of the sin of the prodigal son . . . but he then comes home. (M)

Maybe they stopped the reading too soon! (S)

It says something about the father that he gave his inheritance to his son early - that wouldn't happen too often today. (SJ)

He didn't even get a smaller share - it seems he would have got an equal share. (S)

The father must have been quite rich. He had land and cattle for a start, so when it was told he would have had to be quite rich. (R)

What does the parable mean today?

It's still a story of one coming home, but this time it's not an inanimate object, but a real person and it speaks of the Father's great forgiveness and it speaks of the other son's jealousy. (SJ)

And the other son thinks he's ok and has done the right thing so it's a respectable person again doing the wrong thing. (M)

There is almost a correlation like the younger son being a 'tax collector' and 'the sinners'. He's been with a prostitute and become a dispicable outcast and the older son is the one who has done all the right things and is the respectable one and then Jesus turns it on its head and says it is the younger son who gets the most incredible welcome - probably people of the day would have been quite surprised as the son has gone as low as he could with the pigs. (S)

In our context would it be the same today?

It would be the same today, being a hired hand going to feed the pigs and he can't even eat the same pig food. (S)

It's the same today as cleaning the gutters or driving the pump out toilet tanker! (SJ)

In our urban context this is a Tough Love[2] kid. (RC)

Well it would be like a kid who has left home, goes and lives it up, spends his money on prostitutes up the Cross, gets to have nothing and finally says well maybe I can go home - grovel to my parents. (S)

Tough Love philosophy welcomes kids back just like this story. It really is a Tough Love story and it's loving as well as tough, and to welcome them back when they are willing to abide by the rules of the house, and this guy does because when he comes home he admits he has stuffed up. (RC)

And it's a recognition that what is at home is ok and that's part of what the Tough Love groups say, and now he realises home is much better than anything out there. (M)

And the Father has compassion, he doesn't say just ok you can come back, it's more than that, it's a party. (RC)

Even while he was still far off he goes to welcome him. (S)

It's a very powerful image. (SJ)

What kind of Father would be happy to do that - throw such a big party? (S)

I notice he doesn't get to say the whole speech - he doesn't actually get to say I am happy to be a hired hand. (SJ)

Maybe the father cut him off. (R)

It's interesting that the story says they had dancing - this is an aside - but I wonder how Fundamentalists read this for so long but said dancing was wrong?? (M)

It wasn't fermented dancing. (SJ) [laughter]

It was same sex dancing or not touching dancing. (M) [laughter]

They do with it the same they do with so many other texts - they ignore it. (SJ)

Another aspect of the parable is that the son left when he had a relationship with the father and then came back, and if you were to say God is the father, then it also has teaching about how we deal with people who are part of the faith and then move away and then come back. (S)

Often we create a hard road back. (SJ)

I'm wondering if this isn't a thing we have to be careful of - we say there is always a welcome back no matter how far you go away from us? (S)

The other thing that is interesting to me is that what the son does with his money is not at all condoned in the parable. It is shown to be wrong and stupid. But the celebration is enormous when someone turns around. It's like being part of the

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2 Tough Love programs are programs run by BICM for parents of children who are repeat offenders or difficult to manage.

celebration when one comes back, but not condoning the wrong they have done while being away. (RC)

And the Father doesn't appear to make the son pay it back. There is a Baptist mentality that says we have to work our way back to God, whereas this says it is based purely on God's grace (S) . . . and our repentance. (SJ)

From the parable we know however that repentance is not cheap grace it is a hard road. (M)

Well, I'm thinking of a woman in a church who got pregnant outside marriage and was asked to repent and confess to the church and she did it all, but today there are people she knows who held it against her, so she doesn't go any more and this parable points out which one really is now in the wrong. (S)

I think it is a tremendously hopeful parable and one that gives hope to all those kids out there who stuff their lives up so badly and are so confused and do drugs and everything. This says somehow that God hasn't forgotten them - it is a really contemporary Tough Love parable. (RC)

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 25, 1996

Luke 16 : 1 - 13

[The focus for the reading group was the parable in verses 1- 9.]

I don't believe this is in the Bible. (SJ)

It is a rather astonishing parable! Maybe we need to read it again slowly so we can make sure we understand it. (R)

This is the first time I have read this (SJ) . . . me too. (M)

I must admit I can't remember reading it recently or for a long long time. (S)

Well let's go through our usual process of identifying the characters, setting and plot and see if we can understand what we think the parable might be saying to us today.

Characters: Jesus and the disciples are characters surrounding the parable; in the parable itself - a rich man, a manager, at least three debtors .
Setting: The rich man's property.
Plot: Well, the rich man is informed that his manager is wasting his property so he summons the manager and basically gives him notice - gives him the sack. The manager works out a scheme to keep some friends when he is out of a job - and he needs them because other than a manager there is nothing he can do - so he decides to do good things for the debtors so that will get him some friends. So he reduces their debts by getting them to alter the correct amounts that they owe the boss, that is the rich man and then the rich man finds out and commends the manager for acting shrewdly and being dishonest! Unbelievable! (SJ) . . . And then Jesus says 'make friends for yourselves of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into their eternal homes' (M) . . . Who are 'they'? (SJ)

[Uproar and laughter]

What does it mean today?

I have no idea! (SJ)

Taken at face value it does seem to say that the rich man says the dishonesty or shrewdness of the manager is to be commended. But the bits in verse 8, about the children of this age and the children of light, and the bit in the next verse about 'they' welcoming 'you' into their eternal homes, makes it really obscure. (R)

[Silence . . .]

What it says in verses 10 makes sense. That bit is about trust and being faithful with what you are given. (RC)

Yes, but then the bit about being faithful with dishonest wealth and 'if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?' - if you own it, how can someone else have it to give to you? (S)

Only if they have taken it away from you. (M)

But what belongs to another? It must mean the property of the rich man. So it's saying if you don't do your job with what you are given here in terms of mammon or money, then you will not . . . ? (RC)

[Silence . . .]

What ?

Be welcomed into eternal homes, by 'they'. (SJ)

[General laughter]

[Silence . . .]

Verse 13 makes complete sense and says what you would expect Jesus to say. Especially if you link it with what comes next in verse 14 where the Pharisees are the 'lovers of money' and Jesus then talks of the rich man and Lazarus, with some verses thrown in on divorce! (S) [More uproar and laughter] . . . This chapter seems to be a bit of a hotch potch of teaching and stories all lumped in together. (R)

What I was trying to say is, if the Pharisees are listening to the parable, maybe Jesus is telling it somehow against them. Maybe somehow it is condemning love of money but saying you have to be honest with it, when you have responsibility for it. (S)

But he's dishonest - I mean the manager is commended for being dishonest. (SJ)

Mine says shrewd and that's different. (M)

It actually says that the dishonest manager was commended for being shrewd. Maybe he is being commended for his shrewdness not his dishonesty? (S)

But what's the difference? (SJ)

That's exactly what happens in business Steve. You're commended for being shrewd even when in reality you should be told you have been dishonest! I mean that's exactly what happens when people get ahead by doing something dishonest in business. Like the kid who delivers the Manly Daily at our home whose parents

throw out bundles of his papers and he gets the money for delivering them and they pat him on the head and say he'll make a great businessman some day! (M)

So what are we saying this parable means for today?

[Silence. . .]

I'm thinking we don't have the full story. I mean who are the children of light? You'd think they were the people following Jesus. He says they are not as shrewd as the children of this age. But we don't know who they represent then or now. (R)

Could it be . . . could it be . . . Jesus is having a go at his disciples because they are lousy with money? Like they are not shrewd enough? (SJ)

But that doesn't make sense of the role of the Pharisees. I think somehow the parable was an attack on the Pharisees or a go at them somehow, and we don't have enough information to make full sense of it. I mean Jesus cannot be saying dishonesty with other people's property or money is a good thing. He condemns money as a menace and says you can't serve God and money. Money comes second to what is important in terms of the Kingdom of God. I mean if you take just verses 10 and 13 then you have something that makes sense. (S)

I think maybe some of these verses are out of order. (R)

What do you want to do with the parable?

Leave it and go onto something we can understand! (RC)

[General agreement]

Verses 19 - 31.

Characters: A rich man; a poor man named Lazarus; Abraham; the rich man's five brothers.
Setting: Around the rich man's house and then in Hades or hell.
Plot: Well this is well-known - the rich man has a sumptuous life while the poor man has a dreadful life. They both die. The rich man goes to Hades and the poor man goes to be with Abraham which I guess could be heaven. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to give him just a drop of water, but Abraham says sorry, now things are reversed there is nothing you can do about it. So the rich man asks for his brothers to be warned by Lazarus and Abraham says even if Lazarus went back from the dead they would not believe and they should have or could have as they have already had the prophets and Moses to do that. (S).

What does it mean to you today?

Well I'm struck by something that I have not noticed before. The rich man ignored Lazarus all his life but when the tables are turned he expects that Lazarus will serve him by giving him water and warning his family. That really is arrogant - just like a really rich person! (RC)

I think this one is easier to understand than the others because it is quite clear that the last bit really relates to how the Jews had ignored the prophets and then would not accept Jesus. (S)

But what does that mean today?

I take it as a warning about how the wealthy people and even the wealthy countries of the world should react to the poor people all around them. If you ignore their needs then it seems to say you'll go to hell. (R)

Where does it say that the rich man went to Hades because he didn't give anything to the poor man? (SJ)

Well verse 25 seems to say the rich man enjoyed his riches but ignored the poor man at his door, and that now things have been reversed. (R)

But it doesn't say that directly. (SJ)

But what else would you draw from it? (R)

Well it could be about ignoring the prophets and then Jesus and what will happen. (SJ)

But why choose a rich man and a poor man and then reverse their roles in heaven and hell? I mean the rich guy on earth thought he was in heaven and the poor guy knew he was living in hell. It must also have something to say about that as well. (S)

If good news to the poor is real, then this parable must mean that we can't go the way of the rich man and ignore the poor - we must respond. Wasn't that a major part of what the prophets were on about anyway, that the rich man and his brothers had ignored? (RC)

I think its got to be about our responsibility for the poor in today's world. Ignore their cry at your own eternal peril. (S)

[The group then agreed that as time for further reading was limited we would not look at the parables in chapter 18 which were familiar, but the parables in chapters 19 and 20. It was agreed that a couple of the group would look up various commentaries to see how people made sense of the parable of the dishonest manager.]

READING GROUP WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 2, 1996

Luke 19 :11- 27.

What a great bloke, that is the king - charming - just charming - is this a bit like Bob Hawke[3]? (R)

Characters: A man of noble birth, his slaves, his citizens.
Setting: Jesus is near Jerusalem but the parable is set in a distant country - a mythical country.
Plot: Since this bloke was going away he gave some money to his servants and told them to look after the money and use it wisely. When he has left, the people say they don't want him back, but he comes back anyway and questions the people he has given the money to in order to ask them how well their trading went, and he gets angry at those who didn't want him back. (SJ)

So what's the punch-line of the parable?

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3 Bob Hawke is an ex-Prime Minister of Australia.

Those that have heaps will be given more, so to those who have more will be given, but to those who haven't got anything, what little they do have will be taken away (S) . . . Even the little they do have! (SJ)

[Great laughter and uproar.]

So those who have public housing they will have it taken away! Peter Costello[4] will love this. He can say he's doing a great job taking away poor people's homes. (RC)

So what does it mean today?

Well it's really difficult to take at face value isn't it - the whole thrust of the story. (R)

I can't literally believe it means money, so I think the story is not about money and this parable is about the Kingdom of God because the opening lines tell us that as Jesus was near Jerusalem the people thought the Kingdom of God was going to come immediately, so that's the sort of setting for what Jesus says. (SJ)

Maybe that's why it's not coming - he certainly doesn't seem to be talking about what we expect to hear about God's kingdom. (M)

And yet it does talk about being faithful which is part of God's Kingdom. (SJ)

For me to put it into some context that makes sense I think that to those who have more will be given is actually referring to the, where he says um . . . well done because you have been trustworthy with a small thing so take charge of ten cities . . . so, because he was faithful with a small thing he was given more. So it seems to be the emphasis that those who have and use what they have or what has been entrusted with those who use it, as opposed to those who hid it away, they weren't entrusted with anything more so, for me to make sense of this, it refers back to that part of the parable that says because you made a small thing work you will be given greater responsibility. Because it can't mean that those who have in terms of riches will be given more because it goes against the teaching about the rich young ruler. (S)

But that's exactly what does happen in the world - the rich get richer and the poor get poorer - people use money to make more, so it has to refer to something else because that is not the way it should be in the kingdom. (M)

Unless you're into prosperity theology. (SJ)

But as Mary says it does contradict so much else in the gospels it can't be about that. (R)

I was trying to think what it meant for me if I were able to entrust something to somebody thinking of that in relationship to our kids, and in one sense, the thing I can entrust to them is knowledge, and then I would want them to go out and use that knowledge or ability I had entrusted it to them, and if they didn't I'd think what a waste of time. And then thinking how God does that with his people, then I would understand if God said well I've given you this ability if you're not going to use it then you'll lose it. (SJ)

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4 Peter Costello is the current Federal Treasurer and Deputy-Leader of the Liberal Party.

I think something like the cleaning service I mean obviously when (S) . . . Yep that's another parallel. (SJ) . . . When Michael began he did not begin with the same kind of responsibility that when he first came on and he got that responsibility now because he proved himself when he began, so those who have proven they can be responsible with six hours of cleaning a week are given more or full-time employment. So those who cope with the small things, get more responsibility, and those who can't, it doesn't mean literally they lose what they have, but it does mean they don't get more hours like others do. (S)

All that's true in a money sense as well. You do trade and get more, rather than just wrapping it up and the boss will see those who can make a return and give them more to make more with. (SJ)

Anybody want to say anything more about what the parable might mean today? Is it a difficult and confusing parable and does it seem to contradict at face value other things we have read, and doesn't readily lend itself to any contemporary application - is that a good summary of what I think I have heard you saying?

Well I think it throws you a bit too, these enemies getting slain in front of the king (RC) . . . yes the severity of it (R) . . . I mean I can cope with this idea that God gives us talents to use and it's a risk - I mean God gives us gifts and if we don't use them then they will not develop, so I can understand that part, but the last verse . . . (RC)

Are the enemies the people who rejected him as king . . . if you want to make the correlation and the king is Jesus, then the enemies of the king are the people who have rejected Jesus and so that's not to be taken literally, but to show the harshness of what the choice means - the results of what happens when you reject the king. (S)

Taken as a little story that you have read out side the gospel as a unified whole - what do you think in and of itself the story would mean ?

Well if you didn't have the Kingdom of God at the beginning, it I would think, I'd like the interpretation along the lines, that some powerful political figure says this is how we are going to call the shots and you're my top ministers and I want you to go out and change all this policy so we can bring our books into line and balance our budget again and you know, like the razor gang, you know you've got to get the money in any way you can. (RC)

So what kind of character portrayal is the nobleman given then in that context?

Harsh, I mean one of the slaves is actually scared of him. (S)

Everyone hated him and didn't want him to come back so that says something as well. (SJ)

It might be Hitler! (S)

If you read between the lines it's fairly obvious that the master of the house is meant to be like an euphemism for God, so that's the way I take the story and that's what I find disturbing about it. The fact that he's a severe nobleman who with his harshness is taken as a model for God, that's what I find very hard. (R)

Why do you take that identification?

It seems Jesus is likening himself to the nobleman. (R)

Do you get that from what verses?

From the going away and coming back. (SJ)

And he refers to himself as the king and we are talking about the Kingdom of God so obviously the king's rule, so we make that correlation. (S)

And he comes back as king. (M)

If you take it as a little story by itself it's about this really harsh ruler of a country who gives money to invest or something to invest to his major servants, and when one lets him down, he gets demoted badly, and then the others get promoted, and then he brings the enemies in and slaughters them - so it's not necessarily a good image? (R)

Yes, we all have agreed with that. (SJ)

So in terms of what Rex has said about God and the parallel what do we think about that?

Well I can accept it because I don't have a problem with someone who is harsh and strict as long as they are fair. And he did go away saying what he expected and that's fair - he didn't go away not saying what he expected, so he actually tells them what to do. So harsh but fair I would describe it. (SJ)

He does reward them according to how they have reacted and rewarded them appropriately - he doesn't rip them off. (S)

So what about the last bit?

Very harsh but fair. (SJ)

We don't have to take the slaughter bit literally. (S)

Well how else would you read it? For example how does it stack up with Jesus' teaching about love of enemies in Luke?

It doesn't. (R)

Well how does it stack up against God casting people into eternal lakes of fire who reject him - it stacks up very nicely I would think. (SJ)

But the thing that worries me is that the citizens hated him way back in verse 14, so he must have been pretty crook to start with. (R)

But the people hated Jesus, but he wasn't pretty crook though. (SJ)

Well it says you're a severe and harsh man . . . is that an image of God. (R)

Yes, the trouble with this story is if you make all those correlations the person who is king in the story is not a nice person - he's hated for the way he treats the people. (M)

What if it has nothing to do with Jesus?

Well if you didn't have that verse eleven, that seems to connect it, you could actually take it that he was using this use of power inappropriately. It could be like a Herod or somebody like that who did exactly that. (RC)

Although it's not all bad? (S)

Why does Jesus tell this parable?

Well if you take verse 11 he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. (SJ)

Could that give us any hints about the parable ?

See if you take it completely linked with that, you'd almost have to spiritualise it to make sense of it - in that the nobleman went away and then he was returning so it wasn't something that was going to happen tomorrow - you know what I mean - and while he is away he entrusts his servants to do something and then returns. So it wasn't an immediate thing. (S)

The fact they thought the Kingdom of God was going to appear immediately and then he tells a story that concerns a time span - then maybe the end result could be to assume it is not going to be immediately, and so the real issue is faithfulness while I'm away, not the time span. (SJ)

So it could be a parable about being faithful while Jesus is away?

If you sneak over the page you do discover the people do treat Jesus as king when he arrives in Jerusalem, so he has that feeling or they must have given him the feeling, that they wanted him as king, so I'm wondering whether he's saying in this parable to them, it's not that easy - you just can't make me king and then everything will be all right - there are certain things that you need to do yourself (M) . . . And there will be people who won't accept him or hate him (S) . . . Yes there will be people who won't accept him (M) . . . A lot of the parables actually are told and change the focus of the people who are around when the parable is told (SJ) . . . Because maybe they were thinking if Jesus was made king then everything would be made wonderful for them right then and there. (M).

It is placed right before he goes into Jerusalem and then into the passion. (S)

Anything else anybody wants to add about its contemporary meaning today ?

No I think we have looked at it enough. (R)

[General agreement]

Luke 20 : 9 - 19

Characters: A man who owned a vineyard; the farmers he rented it to; three servants; the owners son and heir; Jesus; teachers of the law; chief priests; the people.
Setting: The parable is set in a vineyard; the wider context is when Jesus is in Jerusalem and he is in the temple courts.
Plot: A man plants a vineyard and leases it out and goes away, and when the season comes round and he wants a share of the produce, he sends a slave or a servant to the tenants and they beat him and sent him away without anything, so he sends another and they beat him, and then another, whom they wound, so then

he says I'll send my son who is also the heir, so he sends him and they kill him, so he responds by killing the tenants and handing the vineyard over to others. (S)

What's the punch line of the parable?

Well you can't treat with disrespect or disdain this man who owns the vineyard, and what his requirements are and get away with it. (SJ)

Because at the end the owner is? . . . going to kill or mine says make an end to (SJ) . . . the tenants - or destroy the tenants, and hand the vineyard over to the other tenants. (M)

And then we read some verses after that . . . and we are given a hint this time, unlike others, as the scribes and the chief priests saw that Jesus had told this parable against them. (SJ)

So what does it mean?

The classic interpretation would be that the vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the Jews, the son who comes to claim the vineyard is Jesus, the servants are the prophets - that's a classic interpretation. (R)

What do we think it means?

Well it seems in its wider context that that is fair. Jesus is the one sent and rejected and killed, as the Old Testament prophesy says 'the stone the builders rejected became the corner stone'. (S)

And just before that Jesus had been talking about John the Baptist, and his baptism, and the chief priests and the elders had been worried about what to say because the people know that John is a prophet, but they, even though they weren't brave enough to answer, didn't think Jesus was a prophet and we know from other parts John was beheaded by Herod and these religious leaders had done nothing to stop that and they could have even been in collusion with Herod (RC) . . . He may have been the last servant they wounded badly (S) . . . So it seems to me to make the classic meaning seem ok. (RC)

Even the wording, I will send my beloved son suggests that imagery . . . that the son is Jesus. (SJ)

So does it mean anything for us today or is the meaning contained only in the text in the first century?

Well the vineyard has broadened out in its meaning - it no longer needs to be confined to the Jews. It could mean the world or it could mean the church today, or even wherever people are with the basic meaning the same. (R)

I think the emphasis can still be the same as God sends people to tell the church or the world about Jesus and the place of this being rejected is still true. (S)

What about the fruit of the vineyard - what does that mean in practical terms in the modern context as that's the whole reason the son comes back to claim his father's share of the fruit? (R)

I don't think it would have been too much different from what it would have been then - people - we are the inheritance. (S)

Aren't we the tenants? So what is the vineyard? What is the fruit in our context? (R)

Well if we metaphorically read the parable then we are quite right in asking who today is what - so what do you think? Are we the tenants or the fruit?

I think we are the fruit, and the tenants are the scribes and Pharisees who have the care of these people. (SJ)

But in our modern context we have no scribes and Pharisees. (R)

Well not so! We have a hierarchy in the church. (SJ) . . . We have religious leaders (S) . . . But we don't as a church in our own context (R) . . . Yes but we still have the scribes and Pharisees (S) . . . And we have people who will not let go of the fruit, or the people, and Jesus says you're just entrusted with them, these people are mine. (SJ).

That does not put the religious leaders of today in a very good light ?

No, that's right - I mean that's why they were so offended by this. (S)

Because we figure that the scribes and the Pharisees thought they were the tenants?

Yes. [General agreement]

Verse 1 of chapter 20 puts it in a clear context - they sought to destroy him - so it is clearly aimed at them. But the popular people thought he was a hero, but the scribes and the Pharisees wanted to kill him. (RC)

So that lends itself to that contemporary interpretation or metaphor?

And Jesus is not making the scene up because they are out to get him. (RC)

I mean the tenants are the bad guys and in the end it says they realised this parable was aimed at them. (SJ)

So to summarise, it's clear Jesus is saying, this is what you've done to the prophets and this is what you are going to do to me, but justice in the end will prevail when God judges you?

And that's why this is clearer to us because we know that Jesus did die so we are reading it in the light of that event. In fact that parable today is pretty well fulfilled. (SJ)

So when we read the gospel story we read it backwards as it were, because we can read it in hindsight - we know about the resurrection?

Unless you're a little child of five and you really flip at what you hear about the crucifixion and death - in fact it's an incredible experience to watch five year olds listen to that story which they have never heard before - it's total disbelief of what's happening especially when you only tell them about Jesus' death after you have spent a year telling them about what Jesus was like and that he's their friend and they were devastated, so I went into the next week's story and told them about Jesus coming back to life, and that made the impact not quite so devastating. (M)

With some of the parables we read, have we all been familiar with them?

Yes, there was one week, the one with the unjust manager, however where we all said we had never read that before. (SJ)

But other parables are very popular, like the prodigal son, and the lost sheep and the woman with the coin, so some we all knew quite well. (RC)

How do the parables that don't readily make sense affect your understanding of the Bible?

I think some of the parables we have read have had the impact of their story brought home much more clearly by reading them in the context of today and the context of where we are. A good example is when we contextualised the Good Samaritan, and I think it's the same when you do that with what Jesus was saying about the Pharisees and the religious leaders and we do have parallels today, and then it has a greater impact of what it means today. (S)

And the close reading brings out things you haven't even thought of, and often throws a whole new light on it and things you haven't even thought of before. (M)

And I think there is real value in doing it in a group like this, because you bounce off each other and it develops the more you talk. So the end result might be a bit different as we thrash it out together and I think there is real value in doing that together. (S)

Has it worried anybody that there are seemingly contradictions in the text and are people comfortable that we don't understand it all?

Yes, yes I am. (SJ)

There are often parts of it I have difficulty understanding. (M)

Well it doesn't mean for me that because I don't understand that I'll chuck the lot out - all I say is I don't understand it but I might one day. (SJ)

But there is enough in the Gospel of Luke to understand and develop our own group of stories we understand today, that are enough for us today to be convinced about what Jesus is today for us. (R)

Yes. [General agreement]

But I know there are people around today that really do need to know everything, and work everything out, and don't feel comfortable if they can't. They need to control the text, and its meaning. They can't sit with puzzlement where it exists, or let the text control them. But that's not me. (SJ).

Because I think we found with one parable that even though we did not understand the specifics, we understood the general thrust of it, and we all felt comfortable with that. (S)

I think it is an excellent way to read. (M)

Hopefully when we read the text in our contemporary setting and we ask what does it mean today, rather than asking what did it mean yesterday, or two thousand years ago, it can empower us to understand who we are and I think if that's what happens then the reading is successful.

If we are also happy to sit with puzzlement, as Steve has said, then that's very important too, as it is the people in power who will not sit with puzzlement. It's the people in control and in power who have to puzzle it out, and then claim with their own constructions of the text they know what others don't know. (S)

For me I think the Gospel itself lends itself to what you are saying, in that God uses the weak to shame the wise. It's all that kind of thing. God takes the marginalised and shames those who think they're powerful. The whole context of Jesus' life and ministry points to the fact that God uses those who seem to be weak in society, and when it comes to reading Scripture, it just makes sense that God would have it that the ordinary person could read it and their interpretation is valid simply because of who they are, and could be even more powerful because God takes someone supposedly weak and gives meaning through that word. And the beauty of this is because of our readings, you actually own what you find in it for yourself. I love listening to people more learned than me, but I find that in actually reading this the way we do, we own it, and we become part of it, and it keeps changing and challenging what you may have been taught or thought. (M)

That's the key - anyone can do it and own what they find in the story - it's the whole point - the scribes and the Pharisees were the ones who were taught they knew their Bibles back to front, every letter of the law, but they failed to understand. Which is the whole point of it really - even the greatest exegete can do it all, but if they fail to understand (S) . . . O*r if they fail to make it relevant to people today?* . . . indeed all of that. (S)

Well thankyou all for being part of this reading group. I trust it has been useful for you.

WOMENS' READING GROUP ONE
WOOLLOOMOOLOO

Readers: Mary Jago (M); Bronwyn McNamara (Mc); Tracey Jones (T); Rowena Curtis (RC); Joy Connor (JC); Lee Parker (L).

Meeting 1: 1st June 1995

Thankyou all for coming. I want us to experiment with reading the Gospel of Luke in a slightly different way as outlined in the letter of invitation. I want us to concentrate on what the story in the Gospel has to say to us today in our contemporary experience of life. That is what it has to say to you as women today. I want us to read the text as carefully as we can, not assuming we know what is there and take the time to look at each story through a simple process of identifying the characters, setting and plot. Then we will attempt to apply this to our own lives today. There is no right or wrong answer. And you are not expected to say anything if you do not want to. So we commence.

Luke 1: 5 - 66

Characters: Herod, Zechariah, Elizabeth, God, an angel, crowd, Mary, Joseph, Holy Spirit, two babies in the wombs, baby John, all the people in the hill country and neighbours.
Setting: In the temple, and the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the house of Mary/, and then the hill country of Judea.
Plot: The conception of and birth of John and Jesus; two very unusual pregnancies; two unexpected pregnancies; also the naming of Jesus and John

What does it seem is the major theme underlying the story of the women?

Elizabeth is reproached or held to be in shame, or disgraced, because of her barrenness. (L)

Blame for this is put on her, but we know today that it is not women who are responsible for not conceiving, men are as well; but the story does not seem to make anything of that. (Mc)

This is the main emphasis in the story for the character Elizabeth. (L)

What is the main theme for women today with regard to child bearing?

Today women have a lot more choice. Pluralism of choices regarding childbirth. Women even have the choice of aborting a baby which would not have been a remote desire in this story where it was so important for a woman to have a child. A child was seen as a blessing not a curse. (Mc)

A woman of shame, depending on the context, can be in the church scene one who hasn't had a child, while in the corporate sector the woman who has a child is seen to be stupid for interrupting her career. A woman who doesn't have a child might be seen to be brave. (L)

I don't agree with that. It is really individual choice. Some women are afraid of having a child. (RC)

Yes I think we need to consider that a bit more. Not everyone in the corporate sector is thought of as foolish if they have a child. (M)

We have taken considerable time in this first meeting to get our bearings and to look at the characters, setting and plot. Let's hope we can build on these lunch time meetings over the next couple of weeks and see if we can ask what the stories might mean for us today. But we have run out of time.

Meeting 2 : 8th June 1995

Before we continue today with reading Luke I wonder if you have had time to think about what the major things, stories, conversations or ideas shape your self-understanding and the world in which you live.

The group responded (in summary) as follows:

* Feminism (a positive aspect),
* feminist theology (a positive aspect),
* social justice, position of women in the Baptist church (a negative aspect),
* ideas about women's bodies (what they look like, what they are for, menstruation, reproduction - the latter identified as being a particularly church based view of what women's bodies were for - reproducing the human species),
* spirituality,
* other women with whom you mix and spend time,
* women's stories,
* advertising related to ideas about women's bodies and what they are for and what they think about themselves,
* awareness of the different social groups and how this diversity is expressed about women's issues,
* the whole area of fashion,
* how our parents brought us up,
* careers for women.

What would be a major question or issue that this group wants to bring to this reading of the text, if any?

What are women's bodies for? (Mc)

What contemporary application does this have?

Today there is a rewriting and retelling of what menstruation is for women, because so many stories are very negative about it like naming it 'the curse'. It's talked about negatively. In the middle ages there was a link with witchery and a thing that made men think of women as more animal like and soulless and used it to classify women as not fully human and while that's hundreds of years ago I'm sure that's carried through to some thinking of today. (Mc)

It has affected the writings of the Old Testament and that's why they were excluded and this followed through into the New Testament and that is why the Baptist Union have their view of women - it's all hinged together and based on a negative image of women. In today's contemporary society if you peel away all the layers it's because women have periods and that's one reason why they can't be ministers - you only need to ask a person who is against women in ministry. (L)

It is true that the reproductive issue that is firstly a biological issue has been used to develop a total construction about women and their roles. (RC)

Are there other questions we would want to bring to the text?

How do women show leadership in the text? (RC)

What is the purpose of women's bodies in the text? (Mc)

Let's pick up the reading from verse 24 in chapter 1 where Elizabeth is in seclusion for five months.

This seclusion is indicative of how women were regarded as unnatural to look at when pregnant and usually went into hiding during the pregnancy even up until most recent times. (T)

Do we know anything from the story about seclusion or why it was there?

We would have to look at the customs of the day. (JC)

Well what do we know about contemporary middle eastern customs - a woman can't go into public space. (L)

You can't win can you! First she's in disgrace because she's barren but then she can't go out because she is pregnant. Terrible bind for women to be in. Elizabeth can't celebrate it in public can she? (Mc)

Let's look closely at verse 26 and what follows.

Characters: Gabriel, Mary and Joseph (to a lesser extent).
Setting: Nazareth
Plot: Mary being told she will have a child by incredible means. (M)

She sounds very submissive doesn't she - 'I am the Lord's servant may it happen to me as you have said' - it does sound submissive and it does sound like she should not question things. (L)

This should not be taken that women should be submissive to people in power like the Baptist Union of New South Wales! But I think that's what has happened in a lot of cases is that women have been put into a position of powerlessness and told to be submissive. (RC)

Sometimes what can happen is that a man in ministry is seen to be a very holy person and one with special gifts, but when a woman asks for the same they are told to stop thinking of themselves and not to upset things - women have been pointed out to be difficult in this regard. (L)

How can we relate what we are saying back into the story of the text and the story of our contemporary experience?

It's the submissive role of Mary in the text. (Mc)

Is this the only way in which she is portrayed?

Well that's one of the ways, but there are others things in there as well and the question of Mary 'how can this be?' when she doesn't have a husband shows that she is aware of what it will mean in her social situation, and it does give an indication she is aware of some of the ramifications of what is going on. (RC)

I think that was a very brave response, so I'm not only saying that she was submissive full stop. (L)

Yes, but that is the way so many people will read the text by saying 'isn't Mary a good girl', you know she was the perfect women, but she would have been put into a very strange position being pregnant and not married in her day. (RC)

Who would have believed her? I mean this is written by Luke who was a man right? (Mc)

We have no final idea of how the text we have was finally compiled but we are just taking this as we have it in front of us.

I wonder if this was a bit more contemporary that Mary would have said 'oh shit no - but if I have to I have to' - something like that that might root her in reality. (L)

It's a very clean cut story isn't it. I mean with the question Mary asks, is she saying this is difficult because of the biology, or difficult because of the social situation? (Mc)

The question raised being is it 'virgin' or 'since I have no husband'. (RC)

Virgin might not be the best meaning, you know as other translations have 'I have no husband' and the meaning is significantly different. (Mc)

Just image how it would be to be Mary! (T)

I would die. (M)

Aside from that I guess they didn't ask whether they would have children or not they just assumed they would - seems like a pretty terrifying thing to me. (Mc)

How would it be to go home and tell your boyfriend or husband to be, that you were pregnant and that he was not the father. (L)

I think that's why Mary is accepting of what will be, because it is something of God and faith that makes sense of it - maybe she is not thinking of what others are thinking, although I would die, because I would be. (M)

But dying may be just what is in the cards in some middle eastern cultures because your father might shoot you. (L)

Mary's in a harsh patriarchal culture so she is at risk. (Mc)

There was the story in the paper just a couple of weeks ago of an Indian father had publicly killed his daughter, as she has had a sexual relationship with a man in the village outside of her marriage. Unbelievable! (L)

What's it like here today?

It depends what circles you mix in. My parents thought it appalling when my sister got pregnant without being married for all sorts of reasons, but one of them being that it wasn't acceptable to have children outside of a marriage relationship. I mean a lot of people I work with would not think like this - it's no big deal. (Mc)

It is also the question today about how children will affect your own life - it's not just having children today, it's a big consideration. (L)

I think an unexpected pregnancy would affect people in the church more than outside where some unmarried mothers have babies because they want to, so it does depend upon the context, there are incredibly different standards. (M)

Conservative people often see single women as being a cost to society and make taxes high and that's why they think a single mum is not a good thing. (L)

It's funny how the angel says that Mary is blessed. (Mc)

Interesting that Mary's song of praise gives God the responsibility for lifting up the lowly and sending the rich away empty and things like that. (L)

So what is Mary saying?

I think she's feeling very special because she has been chosen by God and she is praising God for all that God has done. (M)

But she has very clear idea of who God is. To her it's not wishy washy. (L)

Interesting that it also says all generations will call me blessed, because Mary has been used more than anybody in the Bible and put on a pedestal by the Catholic church to be an unreal figure, and in the Protestant churches in reaction to that she has been put right down and made very insignificant. (RC)

Interesting contrast between how Mary feels about being pregnant even in this very socially unacceptable way and how she talks about it. The positive things that she thinks will come out of it as opposed to the Old Testament view of Eve and how her sin will increase the pain of childbearing. It's interesting as she talks about the whole process of childbearing positively which is not the view back there in the Old Testament, because Eve is called cursed, but Mary is called blessed. (Mc)

Does this say anything to us about God in this story today?

Perhaps God is not so misogynist - but I don't think you can avoid the misogyny in Genesis - but here God is having a positive view of reproduction by saying that she is blessed. (Mc)

Elizabeth is shown to be in a very positive light in what she does and says because she is filled with the Holy Spirit, so the idea of that is that she is a prophet and when the Holy Spirit comes upon her she is able to say something that as an ordinary person she would not. (M)

I think that as an older woman she probably may have had something to do with how Mary would be effected in the local community, whereas if it was Mary just alone saying this is what happened then she may have suffered a major credibility problem. (L)

Interesting that Mary goes to Elizabeth and spends three months with her. She doesn't hang around Joseph or wait for Joseph to give her credibility but goes to another woman. (Mc)

I think that's an incredibly important point. (RC)

It's a really important point to also realise that Elizabeth is legitimated by having a child whereas before she was barren so she wouldn't have had credibility without

that, and she is part of a miracle herself, so in that sense she is able to legitimate what is happening for Mary. (Mc)

I like the way she says that everyone will call her blessed - she claims it for herself. This was seen to be a gutsy thing for a woman to do. (L)

Meeting 3 : 15th June 1995

[The major themes of the past week were reviewed]

We commence our reading with Mary's Song of Praise from verse 46 of chapter 1.

It is really interesting that when we had a meeting of the volunteers in the Op Shop to look at what was happening and where we were going, Rachel (a transsexual), identified this part of Scripture as being the Op Shop's 'theme song'. When asked why it was, she explained that it is all about people who are having the rough end of the stick and getting looked after - those were Rachel's words, and that's what we should be doing. This was not what I had learnt by saying the words in church. It was meant to be a holy thing, not something about people who are having a bad time being looked after. (JC)

That's what we found last week - there is really practical stuff in here - like feeding the hungry, and what's also interesting is reading this outside the context of Christmas so we read things that seem different - you do not gloss over it because it is all about Christmas. (Lea)

That's another thing I find interesting in this context and a lot of the women I work with are girls who are very young and who have had babies, and everyone looks down on them, and you think Mary was like that and it helps me when I feel frustrated with what is happening but then I remember that Mary was like you - that another kid who's sixteen had a baby - although here in Woolloomooloo it's probably much more accepted than it was for Mary. I mean so many other girls around here have had babies, but it wasn't like that when I was young. If you got pregnant you were sent away. (JC)

I remember when I was living in a country town a young girl was sent away and she was pregnant and she never came back because it would have been too much shame. (M)

One of the really good things said last week was the really good relationship between Mary and Elizabeth and how Elizabeth being an older woman she would have validated Mary's story. (RC)

And her status would have been enhanced by her being pregnant. (Lea)

When you look at it today it seems like that - you know a young 16 year old says I'm pregnant and God's the father and how Elizabeth would have as an elder almost given her more verification - what an impossible situation. (T)

If you read Mary's song does it have any contemporary meaning today?

It was identified that Rachel's comment was a contemporary story. (L)

I suppose for me I find it quite encouraging because I find there is sort of real respectability for Mary. I suppose it's part of my issue with the church, that there's a sort of a men's club, and it is there and it is respectable, and that's the way things run and there is a way of talking that's a part of that men's club, and there's

a way of studying systems that act in ways that keep women out, and if you do go in you have to follow the rules of that discourse and do things the men's way. But this is saying God turns things upside down and that the values that the men have are not necessarily the values that God has, and I find that quite affirming because I do find it very very difficult because I do sit on committees where when I'm passionate about justice and many committees treat me like something to shut up and I'm not part of the system so I find this really encouraging - that lowly servants are lifted up and God doesn't necessarily support the proud. (JC)

Who would be identified as the lowly?

Well I think women are in the church. They keep people encouraged, nurtured and do all the trivial work in the church but those lowly servants are never encouraged, they are just expected to keep on keeping on. (JC)

Maybe the lowly are the sixteen year old unmarried mums who are seen to be a burden on society - they are the lowly in this context - they are seen to be the dole bludgers. (L)

Here it's good because it says for Mary you will be called blessed, but for most of the girls here it's you poor thing what a miserable mess you have made of your life, what a state your in, you stupid thing why don't you have an abortion, where here it's a totally different thing for young Mary as she is exalted for the state of her pregnancy. Even Ray's home. His 16 year old has a baby but it is surrounded by love in that context which is so different to Erica's situation where she is homeless with her child and has nowhere to go because there is no Elizabeth - there's no one to tell her that she is loved. So the Elizabeth's of this world make it ok for this young girl. (JC)

That's right in Ray's case there is a number of Elizabeths but not in Erica's - it really shows the importance of the role of older women. But in the Tough Love[5] group that is exactly what was happening because everyone was being Mary and Elizabeth to each other. There was a real love and kindness no matter where people were coming from and everyone was saying gosh you were doing ok - wish I was as good as you - societies to blame with all the pressure - you're a good mother, not a bad mother - all women supporting each other in ways that they did not get from anywhere else. (RC)

It's because people share their pain make themselves vulnerable. I guess Mary would not have had a clue what to do and so she sets out for Elizabeth's house. It's a real story of women working together in a way that stood society and men's rules on its head. (JC)

Meeting 4: 22nd June 1995

Luke 7:1 - 8: 3.

Luke 7:11-17.

What might be a major theme in these readings?

The people who would least be expected to show faith, or have special favours, or do great things, are the ones who are celebrated and seen as being the ones of great faith or worthy of being looked after. (JC)

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5 Tough Love groups are support groups facilitated by Baptist Inner City Ministries in Woolloomooloo for parents with children who are repeat offenders.

Another may be Jesus being seen as more than a messenger or more than a prophet in comparison to John the Baptist. Jesus is forgiving sins so he is extending his role and taking on a greater function. (L)

Characters : Jesus, the dead body, the mother, the crowd and the disciples.
Setting : The village of Nain.
Plot : There was a whole group of people who were Jesus' followers, men and women we know from the text later on, and the crowd, so there were a whole lot of people going into the village with Jesus. They meet a funeral procession and there must have been a bottle neck at the village gate, so they see the funeral, and it is the only son of a widow, who is dead, and the widow is very distressed. There was a whole lot of people with her from the town and Jesus is also very upset because he picks her out from the crowd the text says. Jesus saw her and had compassion or as one version says his heart broke. Then Jesus says don't weep and he touches the coffin which makes the procession stop and he speaks to the coffin and orders the boy to get up or rise and the dead man gets up and began to talk (laughter) - what am I doing here like - and then Jesus gave him back to his mother. And then they were all frightened and that is very understandable because I would be too!! And the response of their fear was to praise God and then they said a great prophet has come and after that they said God has come to save his people. They all go around telling everybody and there's a lot of them to tell the news.

What does this story mean today? Does it have any impact on the questions that you brought to the text?

Well it matters to Jesus when people are really upset. (JC)

And it also says that Jesus can see that she is upset as well. (Mc)

And he feels it too - it's an individual caring. (M)

And it's a woman and she is alone (RC) . . . and also it's her only son and who will look after her now because she is no longer anyone's responsibility. (M)

It's also a reverse order that you would want your children to live beyond your death and it would seem so unjust that your son or daughter was dead before you, the parent. (RC)

Life is snatched away from you - it would be one of the worst moments of grief to have a child die as a mother, your children are so much a part of you. (M)

The words that Jesus gave the man back to his mother from death is really amazing. (JC)

When you think about it, Elizabeth and Mary, that we have just dealt with, God expected or asked even more of them than this widow because their sons were killed - so there is a whole level coming in there when you consider this. It is God's intention to overrule the injustice of the death of the young man. God doesn't want that young person to die. God didn't want John the Baptist to die and didn't want Jesu to die. It was the whole injustice of it and God would rather want the whole relationship lived out. (RC)

Are you seeing this as some sort of pattern? Life has a proper cycle? (JC)

It was really interesting that in all the crowd Jesus picked the woman out and knew what she was feeling and she was not just caught up in the crowd. (T)

It highlights the way in which Jesus has particular compassion for a woman who would have little or no resources without her son. I know that is because she is a widow - so it is a complete and very liberating act by Jesus that restores not just the dead son to life but the woman also is given back life. It is a very powerful story and does tell us that today we need to seek out ways we can bring people in desperate situations back into a fullness of life. (JC)

[The group had agreed to meet for four sessions only. It was suggested that another group be convened when possible.]

WOMENS' READING GROUP TWO
WOMEN READING STORIES ABOUT WOMEN IN LUKE
WOOLLOOMOOLOO

READING GROUP THURSDAY 30th MAY 1996

Readers: Rowena (R); Mary (M); Michele(Mi); Margaret (Marg); Fieleida (F); Taksan (T).

Welcome and thankyou for being a part of this group. In this reading group we will be reading and discussing those parts of Luke that mention women. These passages include the following: 1:5-66; 7:11-17; 7:36-50; 8:1-3; 8:40-56; 10:38-42; 11:27-28; 13:10-17; 15:8-10; 18:1-8; 21:1-4; 23:50-24:12, about twelve passages in all.

In this reading workshop we will approach the reading of the text in a particular way. We will read the text as story, and to help us with a 'close reading' of the text we will look at characters, plot and setting.

The second aspect of this reading approach is that we will read the text for our lives today. Our primary concern will be to read the text in our contemporary setting asking the text what does it mean for me today?

We will also read the text after we have discussed and agreed on what major aspects of our lives form for us the questions we bring to the text. So at the beginning we will do some analysis of our context. What are the major concerns we have and what shapes the way we see the world. So we will begin with an analysis of reality as perceived by each member of the group.

I need also to identify my role. I am here to facilitate the reading process (which may mean from time to time I may ask questions or redirect our attention back to the text). What you have to say when you read the text is crucial in the process of interpreting the text for today. You should not feel there is a right or wrong answer or that you should give the kind of answer expected in a 'church' setting. For the purpose of this process you should not feel there is only one right answer.

So for our first group I would like you to discuss what are the major discourses, symbols, signs, or conversations that confront you in your local context in Woolloomooloo.

Other women. (M)

Families, expectations, roles, responsibilities. (Mi)

A list of the most one hundred powerful women in the world and how that they showed how times were changing, and the only Christian woman who was named as a leader was Mother Teresa - why are there so few women who are Christian in the list? If women can do these kinds of things it is sad to see so many young women in Woolloomooloo who get pregnant and don't seem to have or give themselves a chance to do anything in life but be child-bearers. They take only one of the options that are available for women today and they take it too early - often becoming a mother without a father or husband. Why do they do it when they know about contraception? Why do they choose this as opposed to so many other options? (R)

I guess this is something you find in the inner city which belies a value of motherhood. Because of this area and what happens in the past they don't value themselves and don't value the whole point of motherhood. (M)

Maybe it's because they don't see any possibility of getting a job so they see the role of motherhood as giving them some identity and meaning. It gives them something to do. It gives them as sense of identity and value to be a mother. (Mi)

I see a lot of old fragile sick women here who have had hard lives and battle on. Some complain all the time about it, and others don't, but they make up a distinct part of the local community - they manage to live here under difficult conditions. (R)

In the local community how are women, by and large, treated?

A lot of women are victims from their own backgrounds. Being a women around here is about struggle - struggle to survive - struggle to have a place in life. (Mi)

And lacking a lot of opportunity to get out of this place. (M)

There's a great feeling of being trapped here and not being able to get out of the place and go anywhere else - even for a break, and that's for both the young and the old women and women with families. (Mi)

It is especially a lack of choice for women no matter what age you are about housing. If you are given an allocation by the Department of Housing and you knock it back, then you're here for maybe another five years, so you have little choice to get to a place you might want to go to live. There is a strong sense of lack of choice here in this place. (Marg)

What about how you feel as women who are part of a bigger structure called the Baptist Union of Churches - how do you identify yourselves within that structure?

It will always be pushing at the edge for me - being a pioneer, not really being sure whether people are supporting you or not being given opportunities that are good, but draining in a way. For some men, you might have a mentor, but women are more alone, and there is no one who can take on that role. (R)

For me in any role I have found myself to be a women in that role hasn't been a problem, so at that level it has not been a problem for me. In the roles I have been in there has not been a lot of discrimination for me personally, but I have never taken that top role, or been offered it. But there are other places where women are being knocked and I recognise what you are saying. (M)

If you are a woman and you have opportunity to do something like chair a committee - then there is more pressure on you to achieve this than there would be on a man - you have to prove yourself above the rest. People are watching you and you don't want to let the side down. (R)

If you're in that position and you're not sure of the people you are interacting with then you get the feeling: are they, the men watching me? (Mi)

What about big big picture in terms of the world at large - what's it like in the big picture?

I see a lot more inequality there - especially in other countries of the world. (M)

I think it's about how you are supposed to look. The expectation of men and society about how a woman is to look and if you look different you will be discriminated against. A person I have been going to Tech with who had her hair cut really short and wore pretty straight forward clothes like trousers and coats was identified as a lesbian even though she had a child and was heterosexual. (Mi)

There is a lot of confusion about roles today, and how you can balance all that in our lives. This is apparent for those who seem to be uncertain about when to have children - which generations ago was not an issue. (R)

I agree it is a time of change for women. There is a lot of conflict and questions like 'do you go back to work when you have a child?', and today the pressure is to go to work, but when I had my children the pressure was to stay at home. (M)

It is some women who want you to conform, as well as men, and that's another major influence on our thinking and behaviour. (R)

You can choose to do both, but there are those who think you can only do the one role successfully. (M)

What out of all that would be the major questions that you might want to bring to the reading of the text.? What we are trying to do is foreground the questions and concerns we bring to the text.

One of the things we have all touched on are what choices are there for women who are disadvantaged and what good choices are there for women who are disadvantaged? (R)

So for us as women in a collective way I would like to see that there was something there about women being valued in a equal way with men - that something like the equality that should be there will come out in the text - and that's a collective thing, but it is an individual thing as well. (M)

So we have two questions, firstly what choices are there for women who are disadvantaged and what good choices are there for women who are disadvantaged, and secondly what does the text say about the equality of men and women?

[General agreement]

READING GROUP THURSDAY 6th JUNE 1996

We will read the text and before we discuss what it has to say to us today we will answer a set of simple questions in order to make sure we have read and understood the story. So we will ask who are the main characters in the story?,

where is it set?, what is the plot?, and then we will ask what does it mean today?, being conscious of the questions we identified as important for us last week.

Luke 1 : 5-56.

Characters: Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, the angel, Joseph.
Setting: In a 'general community'.

Plot: It is about the birth of John the Baptist, Jesus and the way in which their mothers got pregnant and how those around them during the pregnancy reacted (M) . . . well that's one way to look at it but another is to say that it's about Mary and Elizabeth having children so the main role is about the women not the children who will get the main role later on (R).

Well I'm happy with that. (M) [General agreement]

So what is happening and what does it mean for us today?

Zechariah is told he is going to have a son, which is amazing at his age, not to mention Elizabeth, and that most importantly that this kid will bring joy to many people and straight away they are told 'keep him off the booze'! (Mi) . . . and he'll prepare people for the coming of the Lord (Marg) . . . the angel says to Zechariah 'I have come straight from the main man!' (Mi) . . . he looses his speech for doubting even though God had sent his front runner. I have always thought of Gabriel as the head angel. (Mi) . . . Elizabeth gets pregnant and goes into seclusion. If she never left the house for five months she must have been showing, and then she waited until she's showing and then to walk out there with that pot belly to prove she was having a baby - holding her head up high saying 'look what Zechariah and me have done' (Marg) . . . the disgrace of not being pregnant is gone and she knows she having someone who's going to make a difference to everyone- she feels good! (Mi)

Does this story mean anything today for you?

I look at it and the one thing you get from it is that you have two people here who have given up hope of ever having a child so it says to me never give up hope. It was a hopeless situation from their point of view but it all changed - so you don't give up hope. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to get that or not but that's what I do get. (Marg)

Remember that I said there is no 'right answer ' in attempting to arrive at what it means today, because I want us to feel free to explore the meaning of the text without thinking there is a right answer I am expecting. Is that ok? [General agreement]

Two elderly people - they have no hope of having children and something special happens to them, so you gotta keep hope! So if you think a situation is hopeless you need to know God doesn't look at it that way. (Marg)

For women today do women suffer the same thing about shame when they don't have kids or go into seclusion?

I think it is reversed now because with Elizabeth she waited to show everybody, but today some women who may be in a difficult relationship or have a bit of a promiscuous past don't want to be seen to be pregnant - they try to hide it. (Marg)

To me it talks of Elizabeth's great trust in God. She was a woman with great faith so it shows if you pray to God, God will respond. She was a really old lady, but she trusted God and really had a great faith because God can do anything. (F)

What do you think it is that God did in this story?

God performed a miracle for Zech and Lizzie. He was creating a situation for a child to be born that would help other people and bring many back. God is not just giving them a child for the sake of it, he's doing it for a purpose. There is a plan to

it, and part of the plan is these are the parents he wants and this child will help many to come back - by that it means people who have walked away from God. (Marg)

The miracle is the creation of life. (Mi)

What do we think a miracle is?

Something we think can't happen but does happen because there is something that God does, that you can't do. (Mi) [General agreement]

Miracles today look very different to the time in which the gospel was written I reckon though. I mean medicine is a miracle in many cases but today we take it for granted. (M)

Yet some miracles remain the same. The birth of every child is a miracle. (R)

I strongly agree with that. (F) [General agreement]

And I think this passage was written to show how God fulfils a promise as well and that should happen today. It is also about prophecy, and how God fulfils this. It is all part of God's plan and that includes miracles. Like the one with the old couple having a child. (F)

I pick up on the word 'public disgrace' because I know women around here who are feeling disgraced with pregnancy or just after pregnancy because of their body weight or appearance, and I know of a young mum here who is desperately dieting just after having her child, which is a dangerous time to do it so. I think there is the reverse to Elizabeth who was so proud of going out to show her pregnancy, when today some women want to hide their pregnancy. (R)

There is some stigma attached to it today in the opposite direction. (Marg)

There are some older women who really wanted to have a child today, who would react the same way because they really want to have a child. (M)

I was really proud of my pregnancy and wanted to show that to everybody. (Marg)

READING GROUP THURSDAY 13th JUNE 1996

Luke 1: 67 - 2: 20

Verses 67-80

Characters: God.

Can I just say before we go on that the most relevant aspect of Zechariah's song is 'that we might serve God without fear' in verse 74. Woolloomooloo is a place of anger and fear, so it is a liberating verse to read. There is so much hatred in this place and the world at large, it emphasises that there is a way to live without fear. (Marg)

It also means that God can be trusted. (F)

Verse 77 is what we do in Woolloomooloo. (Marg)

We might but locals only have stereotypes of what kind of people are Christians. And that's along the lines of pious do-gooders. (Mi)

In many ways we go before the Lord to prepare his ways - not by what we say, it's not just our words because they don't mean for much here. It's how you live, what you do. (Marg)

When we look at these ideas about fear and how people are saved from fear what do you think are the major fears that people need to be saved from here in Woolloomooloo?

They need to be saved from their own weakness. Like in so many families there is a lack of hope especially in human nature. They don't have enough strength to try the other side of the coin. They stay with the old ways that keep them down and don't seem to be able to get out of some of the things that keep them down. Alcohol is the major weakness around here. It's everywhere. That's why the children are running around on the streets and it's easier to get alcohol than it is to get drugs. Drugs cost too much, especially as people around here see drugs as heroin and ecstasy and grass - too much to buy so they stick to alcohol. I know what it's like. I grew up here and in Redfern. People don't understand if you growing up poor, dirt poor, you miss out on so many things and alcohol is one way to cope or feel like you got something. But there's plenty of people who take a stand against that and they don't have anything, but they don't just go to the booze. (Marg)

Do you think there's anything in this local community that's harder for women than for men?

Well you got to look at both cultures - white and Aboriginal women. There are some differences. People are brought up different ways. One problem is that Aboriginal women were always domestic and it's a clan culture and people are taught to be certain things. So women are not confident to say a lot and that's not a good thing about Aboriginal culture. Women need to take the first step away from a male dominated culture, that so many of the Aboriginal women do. Then again so do white women. So women have to come out of the fog of lack of security to take control over their own lives. I know they need too because in our culture when you feel shame about something you look down and shelter your face, but some women are starting to keep looking up. And that's what part of this song from Zechariah says to me. (Marg)

READING GROUP THURSDAY JUNE 20th 1996

Luke 7 : 11-17

Characters: The widow; Jesus; a dead man; disciples and the crowd or funeral procession. Setting: A funeral procession at the gate of the town called Nain.
Plot: Jesus does a miracle and restores life to a man (F) . . . It's the giving of a son back to his mother (Marg) . . . It's about compassion that comes from Jesus, love and compassion. It wasn't the sake of doing a miracle to prove anything to anyone, but that at that particular moment there was an act of compassion to another by Jesus. He had a mother too. He has compassion for her as a mother and at that particular moment his heart just went out at this point to the mother (Marg) . . . There's also the response from the crowd who think it is fantastic and the God is involved in the miracle. God has come to save the people. (R)

What does it mean today for you here in Woolloomooloo?

Well because I look at it, Jesus has helped her and had compassion because she is a mother. So as a mother I always feel I can pray to God for my children, even the daughter of mine that has died. But I believe that as a mother I can call on Jesus and I will get help. When we ask for other things I know we don't always get it, but when you ask as a mother it is different. Well I think so. It's always there. I can't explain it quite right. I can't get the words out. I just know God is always there and it always works out so we can do what we can to help our children and there are not a lot of other people we can turn to except other mothers but with God you can as a mother. (Marg)

Is this special concern for mothers because it is asked for?

No, it is because Jesus sees the mother, a widow and the one joy she clings too in this world is her son and it is just an instance of compassion - like she should have her son with her - not for any other reason does Jesus do this miracle. (Marg)

Did she have to have faith?

No. (M)

I'd say the faith had to be there. (Marg)

Where is it in the text?

Well I don't think it matters to Jesus, whether she's a heathen or whatever. It's just because she is a mother and he gave her back her son. (Marg)

That's different to what you just said. (M)

I think no matter who you are Jesus does love each one of us. Doesn't matter who you are if you can read or write or not, Jesus shows his love to each of us as he did to the particular widow. He did the miracle through the Holy Sprit to give people hope in the new Kingdom that people could have resurrection hope. It's about the new Kingdom and Jesus going to do a future thing so he gives them some hope. (F)

A lot of good came out of this action. Because of his actions the word was being spread, but it was not the reason for the actions. It enhanced people and helped them believe. (Marg)

One of the things we do when we read the stories in the gospel is bring a lot of our own presuppositions to the stories and one of the things we have been told traditionally in the church is that God will respond if we have enough faith - everyone has heard that kind of teaching?

I think God loves each one of us, but if we want to be his people we have to have faith. But he thinks we are all his children. (F)

In other groups people have been taught that for God to act in their lives they have to have faith, but in this story there is no question of anybody's faith and already this group has broken through that. We know that it was faith that played a role in the Zechariah and Elizabeth's story but not in this one. (Mi)

It is true what you say if you don't have 'faith' you won't get nothing from God. That is what a denomination says. To fear God not to love him. But this says God loves us and acts towards us with compassion. (Marg)

Luke 7: 36 -50

Characters: A Pharisee called Simon; A woman called a sinful woman; Jesus.
Setting: Simon the Pharisee's House
Plot: Jesus is eating in the Pharisee's house. A woman who is identified as a 'sinner' comes in with a jar of perfume and she stood at his feet crying and she wanted to wet the feet and dry them, and that's when Simon says 'if you Jesus are

who you say you are, you wouldn't be letting this woman do that' and Jesus answer to that is the story of the money lenders and when he put that story to Simon, Simon could see what Jesus meant. It doesn't matter - small or big sinners - I'm here to forgive regardless of her sinful life. She maintained her faith and her going there - I'd say when she did what she did - she had faith to do that. (Marg).

What about the story in the middle verses 41-43

Jesus draws a comparison between Simon, who has been a very unloving person towards Jesus and who hasn't really shown the basic friendship or courtesy by not washing Jesus feet and making sure Jesus was comfortable in his house, where this woman has gone well beyond anything that would be required by just friendship or kindness. She has been so loving and so obviously finding acceptance from Jesus that she has just given all that she has to make him comfortable, with her tears and her hair to dry his feet and covering his feet with perfume. So it is incredibly extravagant. The sort of thing you would only do out of incredible love or gratitude. Whereas the Pharisee, who although he invited Jesus to his own home, shows none of that gratitude or care. (R)

Then Jesus says the woman's sins are forgiven and the others at the table start to grumble saying 'who does he think he is?'. But Jesus goes on regardless. (M)

What does the story mean today?

Well again it's telling us it doesn't matter who a person is or what they are, that Jesus is very accepting of them and loving of them. (M)

Well it is also the unexpected thing because here is the good Pharisee who has a nice house and can provide a good meal and knows the religious law, but is very grudging in the way he entertains Jesus. But here is a woman, who you know is a sinner and has everything wrong with her, and is outside the religious group, but the upside down thing is that it is her that seems to understand what Jesus' needs are at the time. It seems that she does something for Jesus that the Pharisee, with all his righteousness and sinlessness can't do. She does something very special and so she is the one that is then told she is special. (R)

What about putting it in a more contemporary setting?

Well Jesus is sitting in the Archbishop's house up the road at the Cathedral and suddenly a woman described as a great sinner, so probably a prostitute from up King's Cross, bursts in and weeps all over Jesus' feet then uses her long hair to dry them, and then puts perfume over them - ha, ha - what do you reckon would happen? (Marg)

It would be a bit of an embarrassment! (F)

I would want to know, why are you doing that, I think? (M)

Would it be acceptable?

Would we accept it? (Marg)

For those who do not think the way we do their attitude would be - who let her in the door? (Mi)

So we're all sitting there having dinner with the Archbishop and Jesus and the woman comes in and actually does what is described - is it socially accepted today?

No more acceptable today than then. (Marg)

It is a special respect particularly for Jesus - its just for him. (F)

If you were there, but you were a real believer, you might feel uncomfortable, but what you might want is a simple explanation about why this is happening and I think if you just judge people like Simon did then you don't have faith or understand Jesus' way of doing things. Probably however she would have been picked up and ushered out the door quick smart (Marg) . . . she wouldn't have even got in there in the first place. (M)

What does the woman show to Jesus ?

Respect. (F)

How does she show that respect ?

She washes the feet and all that - it is very special and its very earthy. (F)

It's sensual in fact. She is giving her whole self, and her body is involved. Her emotions are involved and her money's been involved to buy the perfume. Everything about her is focused on this. (R)

These are her gifts to Jesus. (Marg)

Nothing verbal. All actions. Her actions have said all. (Mi)

Does this story tell us anything about Jesus' attitude toward women ?

He's got a special spot for us. He's got a special place in his heart for us. (Marg)

I like that. (R)

I also think Jesus uses this woman to compare her with the very respectable person, and with the story in the middle, it is clear that she had more appreciation than the supposedly good person who was respected in society. But the woman wants to get the forgiveness from Jesus, so she has more appreciation for Jesus than the other guy - the Pharisee. She acts on her faith, so it doesn't matter what you have done or who you are, Jesus will forgive you, not just judge you. So not just because you are a priest will you get forgiveness, but what you do in the way you respond to Jesus. (M)

It's interesting that he uses money to make the point in the story. It means the greedy little Pharisee would understand about money and debt. Jesus has chosen to use that symbol to get the message across. It don't matter whether you're up there or down here - she has given me all she's got and that's more than what you

have given. Money spoke to the Pharisee and made it understandable to him. I think it shows that Jesus wants him to understand. Just because you go into a church and pray doesn't make you a better Christian. It's very much in your face - snap out of it Simon! You should be washing my feet but you didn't even give me a glass of water! (Marg)

In this story the woman is used as an example of appropriate love in action. (M)

I feel really encouraged by this story because it says it doesn't matter how many things you do wrong or mistakes you make if you put your faith into practice then, God can forgive me. So it is a lot of hope in this story for me - great hope if you exercise and do your faith God will forgive you - great hope and encouragement for me. (F)

I think it shows again that God has a special place for us because we are the bearers of life. We have to do so much more for life than men. So it makes sense that God shows us in Jesus that we are special to God. Nothing against men, but this story is very strong that Jesus has a special place for women in his Kingdom. I think it's called women's intuition and we get it from God. And we are not afraid like the woman in the story to go to Jesus. She was not frightened and so neither should we be. (Marg)

READING GROUP THURSDAY 4th JULY 1996

Luke 8 : 1-3

Characters: Jesus; the twelve; some women named as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others - I wonder how many others - it seems to say there were many other women but it says only twelve men (T) . . . in fact it doesn't say many other men and women it just says many other women. (R)
Setting: Travelling about through towns and villages.
Plot: Jesus is on a preaching tour and he has with all these women who are very supportive of him. (Mi)

One of the husbands works for Herod, so it's a bit like my husband works for the evil one and I am with the good one. So you have Jesus out there with one woman in his team who would have a husband who would not be impressed. So if Jesus is taking a big chance I think the women are as well. It's like they say I don't care what my husband thinks. I am going to follow Jesus and I'm prepared to walk the opposite way to my husband and that's a big commitment - maybe it's even her protest against her husband working with Herod? We are talking about a gathering of women here and the fact they are using their own resources is amazing - their own money and clothing whatever. Susanna's husband being involved with Herod and following the orders of Herod means he is in the enemy's camp, which is in total contrast to what Jesus is saying. So she has taken a big choice - she could have come under a lot of persecution you know - but they gave a show of strength openly. (Marg)

It also says those women had been cured of evil spirits. Their lives had been individually touched as Jesus has come and relieved them from whatever has been holding them back and they didn't say 'well thanks Jesus' and go their own way. They followed Jesus and gave out of what they have to sustain the group travelling with Jesus. (R)

Susanna must have given up privileges to follow Jesus as well. (T)

Well she must have given up all the material things for something better. (Marg)

Where does it tell us that in the text?

Well it doesn't not exactly - but you could guess it from the position her husband had that she may have given up something. At least we know from other readings that Herod was not exactly a good person. (Marg)

We know it from history don't we? (T)

Does this passage mean anything to you today as women?

It gives me a hope that when this was written the person writing it has actually named some women. This story could have left out their names and gone straight on and said 'many women' or it might have just referred to women in passing or left them out all together. But it doesn't, so I guess it gives me a hope that what some women are trying to do in the church today, to have a voice again to stand up and minister in the way that God is calling them too - we have the women here named in the text that we can recognise and get some hope from that. There was a woman's story right back then and we can learn a little bit of what that is and for me it is most encouraging to be able to associate with these women named in the Gospels. (R)

Are you saying what it most means to you today comes from the importance it had back when it was written?

It means the importance of it is, there was enough of a woman's story that was still happening, maybe forty or fifty years after Jesus's death and resurrection, to be circulating around the churches. That there were women who were still living out their faith and actively involved in ministry in the early church and that rather than their story being totally dropped out of the gospel record, it is included here in Luke. (R)

Well given that it has not dropped out and the fact we have it as story in front of us today, does it mean anything today for you?

If I look at Susanna and Mary Magdalene - I mean if you take Mary Magdalene's life she has done a complete turn around and embraced all she contradicted. (Marg)

Does this story tell you that?

Well, Mary Magdalene was a sinner. (Marg)

How do you know that?

History tells us she was a prostitute. (Marg)

So once again we are locating the meaning of the story in what we consider the history of the characters to be. Without doing that can we get a meaning from the text or is it impossible to get an intelligible meaning without locating the characters in their history?

Well I can't just look at it without taking that into account, especially from my Catholic tradition, and she is mentioned more than other women in the story, and has more to do with Jesus than the others I think. (Marg)

Well what meaning does it have for you?

Well it means you don't have to stay in a life of sin. You only have to reach out to God and he will change your life, because I can relate to Mary Magdalene and Susanna in some ways - the women - as I know that until I made the choice to follow Jesus my life was not in balance, so it seems relevant today to see these women as surviving the way of following Jesus. (Marg)

Well as a story to us today are there any other meanings for us today?

What were the seven demons that had been driven out from Mary? (Marg)

That's a lot of demons. I think it 's just saying how big the change had been. (T)

Maybe it's the seven deadly sins? (Marg)

The fact that these women are named and mentioned must mean that Jesus accepted them as equals to the twelve disciples. Here we see these women following Jesus as well and Jesus didn't tell them 'hey your place is in the home',

he included them as part of his ministry and he accepted their contribution and their worth as part of his team, and it doesn't say it was not as much as the men. (T)

Luke 8 : 40 -56

There are two stories here and one is sandwiched in the middle of the other. (M)

Characters:
Story I : Jairus (a leader of the synagogue); a twelve year old daughter; Jesus; messenger; people in Jairus's house.
Story 2 : Woman suffering bleeding; crowd; Jesus; Peter.
Setting: The story commences, it seems, in a place Jesus returns to from the land of the Gerasenes opposite Galilee, and moves from an open crowed scene into Jairus's home. (R)
Plot: So Jesus, and I guess his disciples, arrive back from the other side of the lake and people were pleased to see him and a man named Jairus comes to him and throws himself at Jesus and begs him to go to his home because his daughter is sick and dying, and as he went to do this a woman suffering with bleeding for twelve years - and I guess she is an outcast - people wouldn't want to be around someone who is bleeding all over the place - and it would be very brave for her to go to Jesus (T) . . . I mean the woman had a period for twelve years and that's a big one (Marg) . . . so she gets close to him in the crowd and touches him (T) . . . and she just touches his cloak, she didn't want to be intrusive maybe (Marg) . . . and then she might have felt guilty or afraid so she comes forward when Jesus asks who touched him as power had gone out of him and then Jesus . . . calls her his daughter, which is pretty amazing and says 'go your faith has made you well' and 'go in peace'. (R)

When this is happening a messenger arrives to tell Jairus that the daughter has died and not to trouble Jesus any more. (Mi)

There seems to be a contrast between the messenger who says it's all hopeless and doesn't even try to engage Jesus with the woman who has been bleeding for so long who was as good as dead, but did not give up, and touched Jesus and was healed. But Jesus says to him don't be afraid and to believe and she will be ok. When he gets there he only lets Peter, John and James into the house and

says to all the people weeping and wailing to stop because she was only asleep and then they laugh at him (T) . . . it's amazing because they think it is ridiculous

and that Jesus is a fool, but he goes about the process of bringing her back to life, and then she does and he tells them to give her some food and then the parents are astounded and Jesus tells them not to tell anyone that it had happened (R) . . . It's quite a mood change for the mourners, from weeping to laughing. (Marg)

In view of the role the women have in these stories, does it say anything or teach anything to you about women today in your context?

It strikes me that when the child is brought back to life, the first thing Jesus does is say 'give her something to eat', so his first response is to look after the needs of that child. He's just given her life, and then he is really interested in her physical needs and all his attention and focus is on her. (T)

It's amazing he doesn't say worship me or get on your knees or anything spiritual, it's really about the physical needs of the girl. (M)

It's a very physical concern, and it's also interesting that he commands them not to tell anyone, because he wasn't after glory and he did not want to go around bragging and maybe he wanted people to come to him like the woman with faith - not because he was a magician. (Marg)

If we take faith as a theme in the healings, and we remember the story of the widow of Nain, where her faith was never mentioned, or the dead son's faith was never mentioned, now in this story we have Jesus acknowledging the woman as one of great faith. (M)

But what about the daughter?

Well it was Jairus who had the faith - the daughter was dead. (R)

But it does not explicitly name him in the same way as the bleeding woman. (T)

In fact it says that Jesus says to Jairus 'don't be afraid', 'just believe', so it seems his faith may have been a little shaky. And maybe the daughter would not have been healed if Jairus had not taken the encouragement and continue to have faith? (T)

It might not have been much faith but it must have been a bit. (R)

What happens in vv. 40 -42? Is that faith or desperation?

[There was no agreement on this question]

Faith or desperation, either way he did stick around. (Marg)

Maybe that's the contrast. The woman has faith and gets healed, but the male character needs all the encouragement he can from Jesus. (M)

It means so much today I think. Like that woman - how many people are desperate for all kinds of cues for what's wrong in their lives and seek a cure? I can see a woman spending all her money to get rid of such a horrid thing and seeking someway out of her situation and so it says to me when we are desperate that there can be a hope of healing because of what Jesus can do in our lives. I'm not just talking just spiritual. I mean when you see so many homeless people in

such alcoholic hazes, and you think there's no hope, then both these healing stories tell us we should never give up hope, and have even a little faith to see it through. (R)

Even when the child had died Jesus gave Jairus back his hope. Even when it seemed to be totally hopeless. (Marg)

Does this say anything about what kind of male Jesus was?

I think he was worried about becoming too famous and that's why he tells them not to say anything. He wanted people to see him for who he was, not as a magician. And it also tells us he had feelings for those who were suffering, and so he had feelings like sadness and compassion, and he had more compassion than anyone else I have ever read about - he cares about people! (Marg)

Why do we think Jesus healed these people?

In the case of the first one it was almost unintentional, while in the second one it is his word and his touch that heal. So one is quite intentional and the other is not as intentional or even intentional on Jesus' part at all. (T)

Jesus is asked to do it for Jairus's daughter, but not for the women - although he does talk to her after it has happened. (R)

Normally the reason that is given is that Jesus healed to show the power of God but I think he healed people because he cared and wanted them to be whole in their life. (M)

Power might have been one thing, but it must have been compassion and he didn't want people to suffer. (Marg)

The woman goes about it on her own initiative and power goes out of Jesus and that is the incredible thing. It's not just going zap, you're healed! But it is more like it is drawn out of him because she has willed it to be so, and she takes the initiative here - the woman is not in a passive role - she is in an active role and takes the first step. And she is bold and up front like the woman in the Pharisee's house. It's not a picture of a submissive woman at all. (R)

What is interesting is that the roles in the healing of the woman with a flow of blood are reversed. She takes the initiative and gets healed and Jesus knows about it after, whereas all the others ask first and get healed second. (M)

But not the widow's son - he's dead so he didn't do anything at all. (T)

Which means it is the compassion of Jesus for people that leads him to heal, especially for this woman. (Marg)

And the woman seems to have a better faith profile in these stories as well as Jairus has appears to doubt, or at least his servants doubt, but the woman takes the first step. She might be afraid it seems when Jesus asks who touched me but she still went ahead and took that initiative. (R)

READING GROUP THURSDAY 18th JULY 1996

Luke 10: 38 - 41

Characters: Martha, Mary and Jesus.

Setting: Martha's house, in 'a certain village'.
Plot: Jesus went to Martha's house for a meal, and Martha is very busy doing all the cooking and serving but Mary is more interested in what Jesus' is preaching so Martha gets angry with her sister, who is not helping her, and then Jesus says that Mary has chosen the right way by learning what he saying. (F)

I'm not so sure he was preaching. (Marg)

What does the story mean today or what would the story look like in the context of Woolloomooloo.

Well Jesus is walking through Woolloomooloo and people stop to hear his teaching but Martha is more concerned about the preparation of food, the lunch, the more material things and he says don't be worried about all the food, the cleaning, the preparation of the feast. Be worried about the more important things. (Marg)

Why do you think Martha is angry?

Because of all the work she had to do. She wasn't asked to do it, so she's taken it upon herself to do it and she's upset because her sister won't come and help her. (Marg)

Why do you think she's taken it upon herself to do all that?

Maybe she felt that that was important - to prepare a feast or what ever - or it could have been expected of her because it was her role to do that? (Marg)

Could it have been her expected role? (M)

Yes. [general consensus]

Yes. It was part of her role. I guess she had to be the hostess with the mostest. I know if this was going on in my house that I would be doing what Martha was doing, the difference being today I don't think anyone would be too fussed about getting somebody to help out just to get it out of the way, where's she more concerned with the fact Mary's sitting down relaxing, while she's doing all the hard work. But the fact maybe that Martha makes it so elaborate she has all the work' but if I did it today I would have to say it was my choice to do it and not get angry if I'm the one doing it. (Marg)

But maybe Martha did not think she had the sort of choice you had today? (R)

Yes. We have the choice today but they did not then. (Marg).

So what does Jesus say?

The way he says 'Martha, Martha' he's probably shaking his head saying you worry about the things that aren't important. Mary was more concerned for what was on the inside. She feels good sitting there listening to Jesus, so obviously she feels listening to Jesus is more important that getting the sandwiches. (Marg)

But there is nothing in the text that talks about how Mary was feeling. If anything it's about Martha's feelings. (M)

And how do you get the bit about the sandwiches? (F)

Jesus seems to be saying worry over your soul more than you worry over the lamb chops. (Marg)

But there is nothing in story that says the word 'soul'. You have put both of these ideas into it. Jesus isn't saying it's more important to sit at his feet than eat food! That wouldn't make sense. (T)

Well it would seem Mary wanted to be filled with all the goodness that comes from Jesus. If you were listening to Jesus you would do some soul searching wouldn't you? (Marg)

Does this call into question any ides or presuppositions about the role of women?

I don't think Jesus is saying you just only study bible and do nothing else. In certain situations the most important thing is finding God and women should be given freedom to do that. They have a right to do that and that is the most important thing so you don't just do your housework - you have much important things more than that. Today I think, like Martha, people have to make enough money to buy a car, and a house, and all the things make for very busy life, and if you too busy you have to realise you have a more important thing in life. If you have a role like a parent you should do it and do it to the best you can, but the other thing you have to have other spiritual food from Bible as well, so you have to be balanced. It doesn't say women get out the house altogether, but it says this is important as well to think about God. (F)

I think if Martha had just done a small amount of work maybe she wouldn't have been so upset. But she may have gone overboard and that's why she needed someone to help her so it says to me don't go overboard on one particular role. There are a lot more things for you to do in life, and that includes listening to Jesus which today for us would be theological reflection, wouldn't it? (M)

And something like that must mean other roles for women as well, like being in ministry. (R)

It's amazing that in 1996 women are still concerned about getting what are their rights, and here Jesus has given us the right to get out of a role and do something different. (Marg) [General agreement]

It seems to me that it is a definite endorsement of Mary actively learning. Martha's role is freed up. Domestic chores are not the best way for a woman! (T)

Here, Here! (Marg) [General agreement]

READING GROUP THURSDAY JULY 24th 1996

Luke 11: 27 - 28.

Characters: Jesus and the woman and the crowd.
Setting: In a certain place, but that's all we know. (Marg)
Plot: A woman speaks up and says how happy is your mother, and Jesus answers rather how happy are those who hear the word of God and obey it. (Marg)

What does the story mean?

This woman in the crowd identifies herself with Jesus' mother, and thinks how wonderful it would be, to be the mother of such a person who is doing a wonderful

thing of driving out a demon. She sees him as someone and something special and I think that's why she says what she says. (R)

Well then Jesus responds by wanting to take the focus off himself, and wants people to think of what God wants them to do, because his past teaching here has been to do with God's kingdom, and he's trying to bring them back to focus on that. (M)

In a way if you talk about how happy you are because you bore Jesus it means that the woman only has blessing through the fact of mothering Jesus. Only through her son is she significant and maybe Jesus is saying 'no, everyone can be special and blessed by doing this simple thing - hearing the word of God and doing it. That's how you become special in God's sight. (R)

Luke 13:10 - 17

Characters: A crippled woman; Jesus; the leader of the synagogue; crowd; Jesus' opponents.
Setting: The synagogue, or what we would call a church and it's a Sabbath day. (Marg)
Plot: Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath which is considered a day of 'no work' and he heals a woman who has been sick for eighteen years and then is reprimanded by an official of the synagogue for working on a Sunday. And then Jesus replies 'you take your donkey out to get water, so what's the difference?' I'm here and I healed this woman. You'd do the same for an animal why not a person? So then all Jesus's opponents felt ashamed and the others rejoiced over what Jesus did.

What are the significant things in the story that for you as women may have meaning in today's contemporary society?

Jesus is more concerned about a woman's sickness than about the rules laid down by the religious hierarchy. He does something about it. He takes action. He is concerned about her physical illness. (M)

I think it is interesting that Jesus does two things. He is there for a purpose, which is teaching. So he's obviously into full spiel about what he is teaching and then he sees this woman and does something about it straight away. He interrupts his teaching to take spontaneous action for a woman who is suffering. He doesn't seem to take concern for the right protocol when you are teaching in the synagogue. He responds so in that way at that moment she is more important than anybody else who is there. But I guess if she was so sick and bent over people must have looked on her as a very funny old bod indeed. You look at people and judge them because of illness as inferior- the kind of person most people would look away from and ignore. But the exact opposite happens when Jesus sees her. (R)

He even gets up from his place of teaching and goes to where she is. If he placed his hands on her, he would have had to go too her and walked away from those who were there to hear him. He puts more importance upon her and her needs than his words of teaching. (Marg)

In this story his practice is more important than his words. (M)

What's the role of the woman?

Well she's sick for eighteen years, but she has got herself to the synagogue so her faith is pretty great. She could be called a woman of great faith.

Well once again the story doesn't say anything about her faith, or how she got there or why she was there - she seems to just appear. (R)

This woman does not have an active role in the story at the beginning, but she becomes central to it and what Jesus is on about. (M)

But she is singled out by Jesus from all the rest in the crowd. (Marg)

But Jesus does not say your faith has healed you - it's like the widow. Jesus sees her and responds and heals her, even in the face of a religious tradition that said you don't do that in church on a Sunday. (R)

His compassion has taken over his role as a teacher and it's like an automatic response from Jesus to women who are really suffering. (Marg)

When the woman is healed she has a much more active role because she falls into a role she didn't mean to put herself in but is actively praising God in the synagogue which may have startled the leaders anyway. (M)

So then the very religious person gets angry, and Jesus says you're a hypocrite and this woman should be set free from her bondage on the Sabbath, as well as any other day I suppose. (Marg)

Does that mean anything to us today ?

Well it says to me that we set aside the Sabbath day as a day of rest. But if something comes up and you're called upon, or you see a need, then that means you gotta put a little bit of work in on the Sabbath. It's not that strict that it stops people's needs from coming first. But when the official says you have to come Monday to Saturday to get healed - well that's a ridiculous statement and it could not possibly be applied today. I mean how could you say no to someone being helped on a Sunday. You can't always pay strict adherence to the idea of a Sabbath being when you do nothing. (Marg)

Doesn't it give new meaning to 'work' on any day. I mean doing good is what Jesus is on about, and it seems he is saying there are no boundaries or religious borders on doing good. (R)

Maybe it also says we have to have a new idea about being holy on a Sabbath. Being holy is about responding to the needs of people around us in the world - doing something. (M)

You can't put life on hold on any day. (Marg)

It is a day of rest but it was never a day when you can't do anything. (M)

If you're doing good, then it can happen any day, and it also indicates there is a difference to a day of rest and a day when no work ought to be done. In Genesis God calls for a day of rest, but that is not a day when nothing is done. (R)

What the elder of the synagogue said is awful. God never meant that it was to be interpreted that way. (Marg)

So the idea of a Sabbath had been distorted and made into a regulation. (R)

Is there any modern day rule like that, that exists today?

I think it might be against anything that is made up as a rule which says you can't help somebody else, and I think we can all make them up if we are not careful. (R)

Or even to say I work at the Women's Space Monday to Friday, but if one of the women turn up at church on Sunday, we say no, this is my day of rest and it excludes people. So we need to be careful of getting caught up in the idea that the church service is the most important thing, when in fact it is not. (M)

This would not go down too well in most churches. Well in my past church upbringing the idea was that it was fear of God that was the most important and you were not told to love God and trust God. Believe me the way the Roman Catholics put it across about Sunday was the same. If you dare work or if I was to help a homeless person, you would be scolded by the priest back then, but it seems to me now that as long as I am not unfaithful to God I can use the day as appropriate. But the Roman Catholic's look at it different to the Baptists I think. (Marg)

Maybe it's not so different. (R)

Jesus is showing a distinct disregard for the rules people have built up around the Sabbath and (R) . . . but they have built them up to cover for themselves, to make sure they don't have to do anything on the Sabbath - so it's a very selfish way to do it. You know it's our day off - its more to suit them, than anything else (Marg) . . . so lets pick up on the fact that this happens in the middle of worship . . . which means that both worship and action for the sake of others belong together. The synagogue is the place you should hear the word of God and also see the word of God demonstrated at the same time (R)

And what better place for somebody to be healed. (Marg)

Well yes. You go to worship and the healing takes place, and everyone rejoices, so it's the practical side of it as well. (M)

In our modern context do we have any characters which are the modern equivalents of the opponents of Jesus - are they around and can we name them?

Anybody in a church that makes rules that stop you spontaneously doing good for the sake of others, or structures put in place in churches that stop you having the freedom to respond to the needs of others. (M)

It's very hard to say practice your faith six days a week, but on one day just sit and think about it. This leader of the synagogue reminds me of the Housing Commission who are only open for people on a Tuesday and a Thursday and say the other days we don't have time for you, and put people's needs on hold. You need to give people the time without strict terms on when you are available. It's like six days a week I'm allowed to be a good helpful Christian, but on Sunday I'm not meant to be a helpful one. (Marg)

So Jesus is an anarchist?

Yes. [general agreement]

But his anarchy doesn't destroy people, and his rules of life are the same for everybody. (Marg)

And it actually changes people's lives, like the woman who is crippled, is no longer. (R)

It's a subversive anarchy that breaks through all the rules but for the best needs of other people. For me it's still very relevant because in the Catholic tradition I came from I was never allowed to think this through for myself, but I was told what to think and how to read this Bible and now I'm reading it for myself. (Marg)

READING GROUP THURSDAY AUGUST 8th 1996

Chapter 15: 8 - 10

Characters : A woman.
Setting: The woman's home.
Plot: A woman who loses a coin is very happy when she finds it and then she invites all her neighbours and friends and has a party. Jesus uses this as an example of what happens with angels in the presence of God, when one sinner repents.

It's the same now as it was when Jesus told the story. (M)

It means that just because you have ten silver coins, and you lose one, it doesn't mean that the one that is lost is not important. So a woman might have a lot of responsibilities, but she doesn't want to not take all the responsibilities up, so in the same way God seeks the one lost one, even though the other ten are there. (R)

The woman in the parable is representative of God, so the woman is an earthly mirror of God. (F)

The taking time out to celebrate is really important. Even over small things. God celebrates over one person and so should we. (R)

I am reminded by this parable, of last week, when I found five dollars in a coat I had left in the hallway and I had run out of money and was going to ask for a loan. And I found this five dollars unexpectedly and I jumped up and down in the hallway and celebrated. I danced all by myself because I was so overjoyed. It was not significant for others, but for me it was really significant - I couldn't believe it! So like this woman who lost a coin, when she found it she said 'hey come celebrate'. Like I know with the work that I do with Aboriginal children in Woolloomooloo, that if I am part of just one child making a change, then I am happy and it's great to celebrate - and that's how God and the angels behave when one person chooses to change for the sake of life. (Marg)

It's encouraging for us here because as a church in the inner city we could be the one lost coin in many other churches eyes, but it is a wonderful image to have that woman as God searching out and caring for the one lost coin and being happy - in our case about the little things that go right here. (R)

I reckon you're right that God wants us down here searching for the lost coins and not to give up on any of them. And when something goes well for someone God rejoices - hey there's a party. (Marg)

Chapter 18:1 - 8

Characters: The woman who was a widow and the judge; while in the story at large Jesus and the disciples and God are all present.
Setting: In a courthouse in a certain city.
Plot: If you're a woman and you keep fighting for your rights then you'll get them (Marg).

The beginning is all about praying, and not giving up or loosing heart. That's how the parable is told. (R)

The judge is seen to be corrupt from the start because he is not making judgements out of respect for God or other people, so he does whatever suits him. At the least corrupt and probably self interested. So it's not a wise or a good judge, and a woman keeps coming to him for she needs help against an opponent, but the judge does not want to help her. In the end he is so sick and tired of her coming to him and annoying him, he decides he will help her. Then Jesus compares God to the corrupt judge, and God is nothing like the corrupt judge, so of-course God will help even more so those who call out for help. (M)

Does it have any application to your lives today - does it mean anything to you today?

It's about not giving up - keeping on going - both in praying to God and in what action is necessary with what you are doing. (R)

It reminds me of the Amnesty International letters that you keep writing, and you're not sure if they are having an effect, but then you find even the most unjust people will give in to pressure from those seeking justice who won't give up. (Marg)

Jesus also uses the woman as a model or an example as never giving up, continually seeking justice, not getting fobbed off, and even when she is ignored she keeps coming back and back, and today it's the same situation for many women especially down here in the 'Woolloomooloo. If this woman had not been so determined she would not have got her rights, and we have to do the same today. You have to fight for your rights and you have to keep going on and on and do it. (Marg)

This woman is a gutsy woman who goes to the courtroom every day, and back then they would have been told they should not do that, and today it is a bit better, but it takes a lot of courage sometimes, and here Jesus is using a woman as an example of this kind of courage. (R)

What would be a similar type of story that Jesus might tell today or any place where women have to demand their rights where there seems to be an unjust judge?

Yea, I think it's out there everywhere, even in terms of street courtesy for a woman. Some men don't know how to treat a woman rightly and you gotta stand up for your rights, even things like getting a seat on the bus or having a man show you respect by letting you walk through the door first - that's street manners. (Marg)

But some people might say that a woman asking for that kind of thing is pre-feminist thinking, you now a hang over from a non-liberated past, now women can open their own doors or get their own seat equally like everyone else? (R)

I have always been entitled to those things. I'm a woman. I'm special. I give birth to babies. Men don't so we have rights to all sorts of things and if we don't make it known that we won't be walked over - we will be. The feminist thing I am not worried about. I have always taken my rights - that's a matter of principle. We need to not give up, and to follow the lead of this woman in the parable, especially here in Woolloomooloo. (Marg)

I can think of a woman being very vulnerable in a system dominated by men, for a very long time, like the question of sexual abuse, and the ordination of women in the church. But it takes a lot of courage to stand up in these places for you rights. (R)

And that's only in the last two decades. Before that it was impossible. (Marg)

It's encouraging that the corrupt judge eventually gets turned around. So you think there might be hope for the men in the church who still put us down. But we need to be persistent! It's a question of justice. We need to believe in the right we have to protest and to keep protesting until we get justice. (R)

Even as a woman in Woolloomooloo you need to be determined not to give up on life and seek the best for people who are here, or don't get treated properly by the people in power. (M)

Be consistent! And the woman is not sitting at home praying about the judge. She is there at him. So it's about prayer, but also about actions. (R)

What about the meaning of the last sentence 'when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth'?

I think it's something about will people be able to hang onto their faith somehow over the years. Or maybe will they be persistent in their faith like the woman? (Marg)

It's a question to the people about whether they will be persistent in their faith like the woman. (M)

I think it's about Jesus saying you've heard this example of how you are meant to pray and work hard for justice, but will there be people like that - have you actually heard what I said. (R)

READING GROUP THURSDAY AUGUST 15TH 1996

Luke 21:1 - 4

Characters; The disciples; the rich people; Jesus; teachers of the law.
Setting: In the temple in Jerusalem.
Plot: Jesus is warning the disciples about the scribes or teachers of the law because of how they act in a very superior way. They like to be greeted in a certain way with respect. They choose the best places to sit, whether in worship or at feasts, but at the same time they like to have all this honour. They take advantage of women who don't have anybody to look after them - widows, and they take away their homes and at the same time they make a show of their prayers. Then Jesus looks around the temple and sees rich people dropping their money into the treasury, and also a poor widow, who puts in two small copper

coins and then Jesus says what the widow put in the collection plate, though much smaller, is a greater contribution than all the others because she put in all that she had.

If we were to tell this story here in our context how might we tell it?

Well the setting might be in a church service, and some members of the church are putting in $50 or $100 bills, and a widow puts in two five cent coins, and Jesus says the same thing: 'she put in what meant something'. So in the scale of modern economics, this doesn't make sense. But it's about the quality of the gift not the quantity. (T)

Do we have any modern scribes?

I think it has to be the top people in the Roman Catholic church. They have so much money and say they care for the poor. (Marg)

It could be anybody in a top position in any church structure who takes advantage of people, especially the poor people. (M)

What does it mean?

Well the first part is about being real. How what you believe is meant to be matched by how you behave and if it doesn't then you're no different to the scribe. The next part is a warning about making more of someone giving money to a church or an organisation when it hasn't really cost them that much. And somebody who sends in a small amount of money, we tend not to take so much notice of that, and I think it's saying we need to treat both people with an equal reaction. (M)

It's also about how people with money try to determine what goes on in a church today, by withdrawing money when things don't go the way they want. (T)

But maybe it goes even further than that because what it says actually is 'this poor widow has put in more than all of them'. (R)

Maybe people can also be poor in spiritual ways, as well as financial ways. It doesn't matter who you are, but you give everything you have to God and share your whole love. (F)

But this is a very material example - it's about money. (T)

I think it means that when somebody who is materially poor, when they chose to give something, that's a really big hard thing. Maybe it's not out of habit or duty or spare cash but out of really believing in what you're giving it to. So I think it's about a big comparison between people who are materially poor, like people in the Philippines - who are poor but very generous with what they have - and God finds that is more to be rejoiced over, than someone who can lavish attention on you. It's looking at it from the bottom up. (R)

It is also a bit of an equaliser. You have the rich man and the poor widow and Jesus is really equalising them all. Even the widow is more important actually so maybe it's not equalising. (M)

If Bond and Skase and Lew Solomon were in church and all put in $500,000 and Lilly who lives down the road put in two lots of ten cents and Jesus stands up and

says this woman put in more than all of them - how do you think this would be interpreted? It would make the woman appear ahead of the rest. (R)

Well we would agree with Jesus because we know the poor widow is one of us and we would know what she put in. (Marg)

It tells us as a small struggling church, not to go after the easy money, but to be constantly surprised by God's good grace and mercy in how people around here contribute out of what little they have. And that's how the church should go on - the love and generosity of the little people. (R)

I was wondering if it says anything about our giving and if it costs us anything to give back whether we say we have an extra 5% we can give? (T)

Would this woman be an example of great faith?

Yes. [General agreement]

I think it could, because she put in everything she had. (F)

Luke 23: 48 - 24 : 12.

Characters : Joseph of Arimathea, Pilate, the women who had followed Jesus. Peter is named of the men and of the women named Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and there was the two men shining brightly.
Setting: At the crucifixion and then at the tomb of Joseph.
Plot: How the women discover Jesus is not dead.

What strikes me immediately is that two of the characters are with Jesus in chapter 8. Mary Magdalene and Joanna. They have been with Jesus all the way through from that time until the resurrection, which must mean there was a continuity of presence of the women with Jesus, as well as the men disciples. (R)

That's a very good observation. So what role does Luke give to the women in this whole story?

It seems that it was only the women and Joseph that saw Jesus body being placed in the tomb - all the other disciples had left. (T)

They also then went back home and prepared the spices and came to the tomb. They had a major role in looking after the body and to do everything honourable and right by the body, which is very important. (M)

And they actually saw Jesus die - we know from verse 49 - so they hadn't deserted or gone away. (R)

Actually in verse 28 of chapter 23 Jesus addresses them as the daughters of Jerusalem. (T)

The women were upset and Jesus actually recognised them and spoke directly to them - I think it's a note of compassion for women in their particular needs. (R)

He actually picks up on them in the crowd so Jesus had a special concern for the women. (Marg)

Is the role of women in this part of the story of Jesus significant? And does it say anything to you about your lives today?

Well the men disciples don't have a big role at all, and when it comes to the disciples, the men don't believe the women about the resurrection at all. They don't believe what the women are telling them and I think that there is still a great parallel in the church today because they think it's nonsense and women can get treated the same today, especially by the men in power in the church. (R)

In Korea women are the majority of church attenders but in the minority of people with any roles in the church, especially in Baptist churches. In Methodist churches women can be ordained, but not in Presbyterian churches. I see the role of women in the text as in direct comparison to the real situation in Korea. Women in Korea are too often dismissed as idle chatter - even when they bring the news of the resurrection the greatest event of the idea of Christianity. Women were there all along and it has been hidden for too long. [Korean guest]

There are things hidden by people in the Bible, and there are bits of the Bible that get overexposed, like 1 Timothy chapter 2. That's used by men all the time. (M)

Yes but if you read the whole passage you will notice that the verses either side of these verses are ignored. (R)

I'm not sure what you mean. (F)

The group agreed to look up 1 Timothy 2: 8-15. The text was read aloud.

So what I'm saying is that men don't pray with their hands in the air and women wear jewellery, and nobody now suggests women are saved through child-birth (R) . . . that's disgusting (M) . . . well that's right! Nobody holds to that in the same way they do in terms of verses 11-12. (R)

This must be seen as an interpretative problem. Often men just pick the bits that they want from the text and it is why this kind of group of women can pick up things in the text that have been suppressed for so long when given the freedom to read it. [Korean guest]

But actually in Luke 24:12 it was at least Peter that believed the women enough to go and check so the women were not cut off completely and in that is encouragement for us. Maybe we will get more and a more of a voice so that some men will listen to what the women have to say. (R)

At least Peter is a real person in the gospel story with all his mistakes. So maybe it is appropriate for him to at least want to check it out. (M)

The women were brave I think as well. (F)

They were there all the way through from the crucifixion to the resurrection while the men all left and went away and that's what the story says to me today. (M)

It also shows the very important role of women in ministry of Jesus because they took all the responsibility for everything after he had died and they dealt with the tragedy while the others returned home beating their breasts. And in ancient days they had main role of looking after families but they still stayed around and did the brave thing. (F)

Well that's it everyone. Thankyou for your participation. I greatly appreciate it.

WOMENS' READING GROUP THREE
WOMEN READING STORIES ABOUT MEN IN LUKE
WOOLLOOMOOLOO

This reading group arose out of the Woolloomooloo Women's Reading Group Two. The women requested that the group meet again and read stories in Luke about Jesus and men.

The group was interested in what these stories might tell reveal about the way Jesus treated men, and what attributes or characteristics of being male in the stories had to say to our contemporary setting.

Readers: Margaret Martinez (M), Sondra Kalnins (S), Tracey Jones (T), Mary Jago (Mary), Sue Jennings (Sue), Rowena Curtis (R).

Story 1 : Luke 5 :12 -16

Characters: Jesus, a man covered with leprosy, the priest and Moses.
Setting : In one of the cities, but we don't know which one.
Plot: A leper sees Jesus and bows down and begs him to heal him and Jesus does, and then says don't tell anyone about it, but go and see the priest as Moses commanded. (M)

How does Jesus heal the leper?

He stretches out his hand (M) . . . and he touches him (Mary) . . . and because he chooses to (Sue) . . . and also the man is aware that Jesus could heal him because he says 'if you choose'. (S)

What does it mean for you today?

When you're struck with illness you become very vulnerable. So he is begging Jesus to heal him. He was looking for someone to help him and believed Jesus could heal him. So it shows the vulnerability of the person who is ill, and he would have been an outcast as well, being a leper, so he would have been kind of desperate. (Sue)

What about today? We are going to try to read it for us today - or put it in our own contemporary place.

Well I think it's the same. It would be like someone having something like chicken pox that isolates them from the community (Sue) . . . like drug addiction (T) . . . AIDS (S) . . . AIDS is probably the big one today, anything that isolates and puts them in a very vulnerable situation, (Sue) . . . and the fact we have no cure to AIDS makes it like leprosy was then. (Mary)

Does this story say anything to you about maleness in the contemporary world in which you live?

Men when they are struck down by illness are just as vulnerable as anybody else - they are affected the same and respond the same way as women. (Sue)

It also shows that not only did women have faith in Jesus, but men did as well. And he must have been very desperate to approach Jesus in this way and prostrate himself on the ground. I suppose it was his way of putting it that I'm a

lowly creature and you're Jesus and he had no qualms about asking for cure. He was quite happy to throw himself at his feet and I think for a man to do that, well men don't do that so readily today. I don't think that men are as ready to accept faith in Jesus as women. They are a bit hesitant. But women tend to be more able to show their feelings and believe. I wonder if he thought Jesus was just going to leave him there - he had a lot of faith to do that. (M)

What about the male role of Jesus - does it say anything about that?

I think he's got compassion and didn't care that he was touching someone who was regarded as untouchable and the same is true for today. You hear about the stigma of touching people who have got AIDS and things like that. Jesus reaches out beyond that and it shows a lot about his character and he had that tenderness and compassion. (Sue)

And even though lots of people were coming to see him and to hear him he wasn't getting off on that or being distracted by it, he was still going off and praying. (S)

So the image of Jesus in the story is one of compassion, touching and then after all of that withdrawing into the desert to pray. Is that a contemporary male image today that would be popular?

I don't know - maybe if you're Scott Peck or someone like that - but I don't know. (M)

Well let's leave the question open ended and to move onto the next story with this in mind.

<u>Story 2: Luke 5: 27- 32.</u>

Characters: Levi - a tax collector; Jesus; the Pharisees and their scribes.

What are Pharisees? (S)

Does the story give you any hint who they might be?

Well perhaps they are people who are writing down what Jesus says, because it is saying the Pharisees and their scribes. (S)

And what role are they given in the story?

Well they are questioning why Jesus had anything to do with the tax collectors. (S)

What's the actual wording in the text?

Complaining. (Mary)

So even if we don't know who they were historically we can at least pick up from the story that they were people in the story who complained about Jesus and what he did - so what is it they are complaining about?

That Jesus is mixing with the wrong people - being with the evil doers not the do gooders. (M)

Just from the story itself do we think Levi is a good or a bad character - how is he presented in the story?

Well I suppose the fact he was a tax collector put him on the outer for a start. But it doesn't really say if he was a good man or a bad man. It just says he was a tax collector and he must have had some sort of respect because he gave a large banquet and had a large crowd there. (M)

In our contemporary setting are tax collectors popular or not?

They might be more like politicians in our context. (Sue)

Yes, it's more like a politician. (M)

Well whatever his character, he gets up and follows Jesus, and leaves everything, and gives a banquet and includes all the people that would normally have been excluded like sinners and all their mates. (Sue) . . . I image that the Pharisees and scribes were invited to the banquet, which would normally be the way, but the implication is that these other people normally wouldn't, that's why they are complaining that the other people have been invited to Levi's house. (Sue)

So we have Levi who goes through a life changing situation, and Jesus who calls him to follow him and then he throws a big banquet and the scribes and the Pharisees, whoever they are, begin to complain, and Jesus then gives them an answer. (Mary)

Well you don't look after people who are well, you look after people who are sick, you look after people who are in need, not those who aren't in need and it doesn't matter if they are politicians or whatever. If they are in need you should help them and that's what he does. (M)

And also that they should repent, those people who are sick. So it's more about calling sinners to repent rather than healing people. (S)

Who are the righteous?

I suppose his disciples, believers in God, people who believe in Jesus, because he doesn't need to help them. He needs to get to the people who have no faith. The people who are selfish and greedy. He's got to get to them. They are the ones living, to quote the Pope 'living in a sea of abundance' and so he says for them to stop and have a look at what is going on and to refocus. That it's not just money that's important! There are other real issues in life, so they are the ones he has to help. (M)

Also in this passage it seems to indicate that the righteous were the Pharisees and their scribes, the ones who were complaining about the presence of the tax collectors and sinners, and its like Jesus is addressing them. It's not you righteous that need me, it's the sinners that I'm working with that need me. (Sue)

What does it mean today?

It means the same. Like those people in our churches today who think they are the righteous ones and who consider themselves in and Jesus is calling those who are on the fringes and don't fit into that community, and it's like the righteous already know that and are supposed to know. (Sue)

Or maybe he's saying the righteous are the people who think they are righteous, and maybe he's saying therefore you don't need any of my help, while those of you who know yourselves to be sinners, then you need me. (Mary)

Could it be a bit like when people say to us 'well I know that person, you're wasting your time working with them or wasting your time trying to help them'. But in light of this story they are the people that we should be spending the most time with, and I suppose it's like society around us saying 'why are you spending your time with them, they are hopeless'. It's the ones who are continually hurting themselves that we need to put the time into, because the ones who are going ok don't need it. This especially applies today with what we do because we all get criticised like that. You know they are an addict or they are a failure, but they are the ones who we feel need the most of our help. So the people who make the comments look on themselves as the righteous ones and I suppose the righteous Pharisees begrudge the attention these kind of people are getting. They don't help them but they begrudge the help they get from Jesus. (M)

Does it say anything about maleness or about Jesus as a male?

No, but it's all men in the story and like today it's men who have control over money, the people's money. The people in charge of finances today, bankers, the stock-brokers, are men and like Levi they still get the money and put it in their pockets. (M)

I think it is the same today that people don't understand why people who are the modern day sinners or outcasts would get the attention of the church or Jesus, because in their eyes they don't deserve it, so in that way the righteous seem to be a pretty poor lot really. (S)

It's like the righteous don't even recognise they are sinners. (T)

So it's a bit like the letters we have received from righteous people about the Women's Space[6] saying we should not work with prostitutes and sinners. (S)

We shouldn't call them sex workers and we shouldn't be working with them, so it's a strong modern day parallel. (T)

So it is still happening today, and it is exactly the same today as it is in this story and that's a long time for something not to change - it is exactly the same today and we could tell it with our own experience. (M)

<u>Story 3 : Luke 6 : 6- 11</u>

Characters: A man with a withered hand, Jesus, scribes and Pharisees.
Setting: In church (synagogue).
Plot: It's like the scribes and Pharisees are waiting to trap Jesus hoping he does something they can get him for, because he's given them a slap in the face again, by putting it to them, what do you choose to do - something good or something evil? Now of course anyone can answer to do good but he's put them on the spot. What do I do on the Sabbath something good or something not good. It's what he does. (M)

What is it about?

It's about breaking the law, because the law is not just or in God's will. (S)

I think it's taking the letter of the law rather then the spirit in which it is said. So it's like the law is to keep the Sabbath holy and they want to keep that in a legalistic

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6 The Womens' Space is a project of Baptist Inner City Ministries to meet the needs of women at risk and women working in the sex industry in the Kings Cross area of Sydney.

way, that keeps them bound. But Jesus is saying 'no' it's about actually freeing people - its about liberty. But they wanted to keep Jesus to the exact letter of the law - their own legalisms, and Jesus is redefining what that means. (Sue)

So how does Jesus redefine what it means? What's Jesus 'rule'?

He makes the comparison between good or harm and life or destroying it. We have the choice and whether or not it is on the Sabbath, what are we going to choose? Whatever empowers or frees people, or gives them life is important, not keeping people bound or destroyed. (T)

What does it mean for us today?

Well still there will be situations when it will appear that you might be doing something wrong in some people's eyes if you follow Jesus directions - you might be criticised by people for doing it. (S)

It's like the drunk guy who walked in off the street last Sunday and asked for prayer for a friend who had died. If we had been any other church we would have had a deacon usher him out, but we stopped and had a prayer and included him, and then he sat down and stayed for the rest of the service. So it's just like that. (Sue)

What is the reason, whether it's society's law or the church's law, what is the reason that Jesus says we can break the law?

Because you save life instead if destroying it. (T)

People's lives are more important than the law of the Sabbath. (M)

It's just like those people who have complained about our work with sex workers and so they say it's wrong but that is not what Jesus is saying at all. (Mary)

No he says the complete opposite. (M)

In view of the all male characters does it say anything to us today about maleness?

The scribes and the Pharisees are still pretty much around. Men in the church! Still wanting to keep people to legalisms and keep people bound. They tend to be the ones who have the power, who are the ones who think they can throw their weight around. (Sue)

It also shows that Jesus in his character is not a weakling, because he stands up to other males for right. (Mary)

Especially knowing they are plotting and planning something. (M)

And he stands up for those who are weaker. (Sue)

For the underdog. (M)

What happens in verse eleven still happens today. People still plan with and discuss ways in which to bring people down. Anybody who rocks the boat the way Jesus did today will have people planning against them because their idea of what is good is totally different to what Jesus calls us to do. (M)

The poignant thing is that the very people who are plotting and planning are the very people who are supposed to be religious. (Sue)

Story 4 : Luke 9 : 43 -56

Welcome again to another reading group. I want to remind you that we have at your request changed the reading process a little in that we are reading the text with the focus on what is happening in the story in terms of men, their characters and their portrayal, and what they are on about, and then we ask does the story teach us anything about maleness, Jesus, and men today. We have a number of little stories to read in these verses. So generally who are the characters?

Jesus, the disciples specifically James and John (S) . . . a child (Mary) . . . Samaritans. (S)

It seems that verses forty-three up to forty-five set the scene a bit. The disciples are too afraid to ask Jesus about what he says about being betrayed. (R)

And they seem a bit dull. They don't understand. Too afraid to say so to. (S)

They definitely set the background for the incidents that follow. After being afraid and dull they go on in verses forty-six to forty-eight with an argument about who will be the greatest! (Mary)

Jesus says that the least among them is the greatest and uses a child to show them that it is the least among them that is the greatest - whatever that means? So whoever welcomes the least among you welcomes me and the one who sent me. So that's God. (S)

What does it mean?

A little child is innocent and not 'great', judged by the standards of society, which Jesus is not taking as the standard of greatness in that way. (S)

Well the disciples have not seemed to have heard what Jesus is saying to them earlier on or understanding his pain: 'betrayed into human hands'. It doesn't have any effect on them in any positive way. (R)

In fact they start talking about themselves, an incredibly selfish sort of response! Talking about themselves and who is the greatest. And people don't think children

are very important and they would not have rated highly in the minds of the men arguing over who is the greatest. (Mary)

I think where it says the meaning was concealed from them that it is interesting. They couldn't actually hear what Jesus said. It was actually hidden from them. So what was preventing them from understanding that? Like was it their selfishness? Or what other things in their lives were stopping them from understanding this? (T)

You would think they didn't want to know because they were too afraid to ask and only concerned about which one was top of the pile. (M)

And what were they afraid about? The fear of the concealment? Why did they not deal with this inner stuff that must have been going on for them - you know I don't want to ask! They had so much stuff going on for them in their humanness that they didn't want to look at what was actually there, what Jesus had said, and what it meant for them. (T)

So how are the men portrayed in this story?

Not very able to look at what they are on about and not very searching within themselves, so they can actually hear what it is Jesus is saying to them. (T)

They are fearful and not very wise in terms of understanding. Or at least they are not perceptive of Jesus, which means they are not very perceptive of each other. (R)

Preoccupied with the question of who is the greatest? (M)

Any modern day parallels for this?

Lots of them. (R)

Look at the newspaper owners. They are always in competition about who is the greatest. I guess it is more so with men because more men are still in business than women, and there they are all scratching and clawing their way to the top. (M)

What is Jesus' alternative given in the story?

Well he's saying it's not a question of who is the greatest and stop looking at every thing like that, maybe comfort a child? No, no, no. (M)

He's making himself the child who is welcomed like in Matthew. And the child who is welcomed is welcomed by God, so the child who is standing there is an example, but Jesus is actually saying I am the child. I am the least. (R)

I'm not sure what you are referring to in Matthew?

I'll look it up. It's the same story in Matthew 18. Here it is. Verse five says:
' whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me'. (R)

It seems as though he is saying look at the child and putting himself into the same position so he is - it's a different type of greatness to what the disciples are talking about. (S)

It's a bit like Matthew 25 'least of these', when you do something for the least you do it for me.
Jesus is saying he is like the child and making himself the least, which is a sign of greatness in being able to welcome the child. (R)

But if one of them was able to say they were the least, then he would be the greatest. But I don't think one of those guys would have wanted to admit he was the least. They all wanted to be the greatest, where as Jesus is, in reality. So his greatness is different to that of the disciples. (Mary)

What is happening in verses 49 - 50?

The main characters are John, Jesus and a person casting out demons. (S)

The basic plot is that they saw some people casting out demons in Jesus name, so they tried to stop him because he was not part of their group. (T)

And what does Jesus say?

That they shouldn't stop him because whoever is not against you is for you. (T)

So what kind of male character is John and those who were with him portrayed as?

Well, he has this notion that it was the wrong thing for this guy to cast out demons in Jesus' name so he feels he has the authority to stop him (T) . . . because he's not part of their group. (S)

And again it comes out like they are the important ones. (Mary)

A special cliquey group and if you are not part of that group then you are out. (M)

Are there any contemporary examples of this kind of thing today, and if there are what would the contemporary meaning of Jesus' words in verse 50 be?

Well it goes back to the divisions between the Catholic and Protestant churches here - maybe not as much today - but Jesus is saying the same thing - you're all on the one side. It does still happen today though. (Mary)

I suppose it is the same when Christians criticise us for working with the people we do. They don't see us as part of the formal traditional church organisation. We are a bit different, so I suppose the reply is - you can do work for Jesus we don't all have to be in the same group. (S)

Well Jesus is saying he is not doing anything to hinder you in your belief or what you do. He's not causing anybody any harm and John is a bit upset because while he is doing good he takes it in the way 'how dare he?'. (M)

A bit like the disciples were the only ones who could use the name of Jesus?(T)

Yes, and like the way the needle exchange program[7] has been questioned by other Christians who don't understand it. (S)

What if someone in the local community started to help someone and said they were from BICM but we knew they weren't? (Mary)

Well if their intention and their belief was with God, it would be good. (T)

So it's basically a little insight into not excluding others as Tracey, I think, said at the beginning. So you have me worried now about the people who come and help us at breakfast called the bake-bean gurus. I don't know what to think now. I wonder if they use Jesus name? Well they follow a Guru in India, who I thought claimed to be Jesus, but they say he did not, only others did. They serve baked beans so we call them the bake bean gurus, and we were going through a conflict whether we should allow them to continue or not. (Mary)

Well do they do any good? Are they a help? Do they do anything to undermine what is going on? (M) . . . I'll need to find out won't I. (Mary)

Well there is certainly a real life parallel there. I guess if they are doing this as an act of charity in the name of the Guru then it's not ok. But if they are doing it in

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7 This refers to a program conducted by Baptist Inner City Ministries (BICM) as part of a harm minimisation program with the intravenous drug using community.

Jesus' name then it is. So we need to welcome people to work with us from all Christian groups. (R)

Well in view of time let's move onto verses 51 - 56.

We already identified the main characters as some messengers, Jesus, a village full of Samaritans and James and John. (S)

The plot's simple. James and John wanted to take action against the Samaritan village that did not accept Jesus who was on his way to Jerusalem. (M)

If you look at the bottom of the page in this version, what is it? It's the New Revised Standard Version. Well at the bottom of the page is a footnote which says Jesus rebuked them and says 'You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human being but to save them'. That seems to be very important, so why is it a footnote and not in the story itself? (S)

Exactly! Who decided that? My guess is it is a disputed text or there are variations, but it seems to make very good sense of the story and clearly identifies what Jesus is on about. (R)

How are James and John portrayed ?

They think they are pretty good if they can command fire down from heaven - they have themselves up there on a pedestal . . . (M) [laughter and uproar]. . . they won't let anyone stop them . . . (Mary) . . . well you know they want to destroy them (S) . . .and they think they have the power to do that, they say we, not Jesus . . . (M) . . . and that they have a right to do it. (Mary)

So what do they want to do?

Annihilate the village! Take it out! Destroy! (M)

So how are they being portrayed?

A step up from the judgmental in exorcisms in the last passage, where they said they tried to stop him from doing it, to here with a rejection situation. They are going to judge and put a punishment on this village and they are acting like they think they are God or something. Like they had the right to make that sort of a judgement. (R)

And they are very hot-headed and get angry very quickly without thinking about it. (Mary)

I want to know where they thought they got the power from? Probably because they are followers of Jesus and his right-hand men they think they have the power to do that. Jesus would have that power. (M)

And I think it's disturbing that if they are Jesus' followers and they have been travelling with him for a while they understand so little of what he is on about and they are ready to jump down and destroy anyone who opposes them. I mean the Samaritans haven't really done anything to harm Jesus. They just won't receive him because he is off to Jerusalem. I don't know what that entails but you know they are ready to destroy them for that, so they don't seem to have learnt much at this point or don't seem to understand the Spirit or what Jesus is on about. And it's an abuse of power as well. I mean if Jesus wasn't there and they had the power

maybe they would have used it. So it's about the abuse of power as well. People can get very high and mighty thinking they can use power. (S)

James and John saw the use of violence as the answer. Like calling down fire from heaven to consume the whole village is violence in a big way. (T)

Well over reaction. (R)

What does Jesus say in reply?

Well basically they don't understand the Spirit of God and Jesus Christ and that Jesus isn't there to destroy life but to save life. But they don't get it - it must still be concealed from them. (T)

So how is Jesus portrayed in the story?

He is one of teacher and tries to help them understand that and to confront them, so they are confronted with what they are doing. (T)

He is much more able to forgive. He doesn't need to go and rebuke the Samaritans or do anything to them. He is just able to go on even when he is realising things are getting tougher for him - going towards Jerusalem means he is going to the place he will die, where a big rejection is going to happen for him - so it's getting tougher. They reject him but he doesn't have to do anything to them. He shows even though he has the right to judge as God has the right to judge, he chooses to show acceptance and forgiveness to people, even when people reject him, and that's how God is. (R)

The violent option is not one Jesus chooses. In fact Jesus turns the other cheek. (M)

What modern day application does the story have?

Well you only have to look at the Dalia Lama and his rejection from Tibet by China - he doesn't make a violent response. (S)

And our government won't say anything to China because they are afraid of their power. (M)

The James and John equivalents are like America and Saddam Hussain and people in power, (M) . . . America especially (S).

What if anything does this story say to this situation?

The whole point is to save human lives not to destroy them. (S)

Jesus is non-violent in this story. He's very assertive with the disciples and rebukes them, but he is not aggressive towards the village. (R)

And his non-violence doesn't mean he doesn't do anything. He is active and takes a stand and rebukes them - he takes action. (Mary)

How would you summarise how these males characters are portrayed other than Jesus in the gospel story?

Vain, self centred. (Mary)

After power. (M)

Competitive. (S)

Living with fear. (T)

Unable to confront their own fears. (S)

Emotionally unbalanced . . . [laughter]. (M)

Reactive. (R)

Aggressive. (T)

Pretty stupid actually . . . [more laughter]. (S)

They seem to be getting worse. (R)

Is that how they have generally been portrayed?

Not portrayed like that generally at all. (S)

No, no, the disciples were always, and I'm not up on the bible readings, but they were always portrayed as clean cut young men! Not greedy vain self-centred boys! [laughter]. Really they are normally portrayed as apostles in stained glass windows. I had no idea they got up to all this kind of stuff. Whenever I have looked at the windows in the convent school or the church, and I've been in a few, they are always right up there! I'm always looking up to them and they all have the most saintly looks on their faces, and even with hallows. If I told these stories to my daughter Danielle, without telling her anything else, I reckon she would think they were very bad men, not the apostles. They are meant to be the pick of the crop - well not any more! (M)

It's like they are misguided in their allegiance to Jesus in that they think they are doing the right thing, and they try to please Jesus by saying 'look this person is casting demons out in your name, we'll stop him' but it's like they just haven't go the point. And they try to please Jesus by doing what they think is right, but not understanding what is going on. (S)

None of the women we read about come across like any of these men. (M)

No indeed. Great was their faith wasn't it! (R)

<u>Story 5 : Luke 18 : 1-8</u>

Major characters: A widow; a judge.
Setting: A court room.
Plot: It's about a woman seeking justice against her opponent. It's the story of a woman who is coming back time and time again to get justice, and she's coming back to a judge who has no belief in God or respect for anyone, and she comes back even to hit her head against the same brick wall over and over and it pays off for her in the end because she gets what she seeks. She gets it not because she is entitled to it but because the judge wants to get her off his back. (Mary)

What kind of character portrayal does the major male figure in the story have?

Well he's got no fear, faith or respect for anyone. He's able to give this judgement because it suits him, so he's the type who is not really interested in justice but in making it more easy for himself. (S)

So in what way is the woman portrayed in the story? What kind of characteristics or attributes does she have?

Tenacity (T) . . . yes (Mary) . . .perseverance (M) . . . and I would dare say she is a woman who has enough faith to keep going back again and again and that there will be a light at the end of the tunnel, she's got a lot of tenacity (Mary) . . . she doesn't give up (F) . . . knowing the odds are against her she doesn't give up (Mary) . . . they are very positive points and she is the heroine of the story. (T)

Well then what does the story mean to you today?

Quite often today, rather than deal with what a woman is saying, men will do things to keep us silent or just to get rid of the problem, you know just to keep us quiet. Not a lot of men can listen to what we have to say or to some of our complaints so they shut us up as quick as they can . . . his attitude is to keep them in the kitchen out of sight. (Mary)

Where do you get that from?

His attitude is 'I'll deal with this just to get you off my back', but not because he is really concerned. It's like when men don't want to confront a problem a woman puts before them, they have this attitude like take this or do that - out of sight out of mind. (Mary)

What do others think?

I suppose at the end where Jesus is speaking about where God is granting justice, I suppose it means we have to keep faith and prayer going, and continue with that position of belief. I mean this woman kept working at it because she believed she was entitled to justice - but I'm not sure what it means 'when the Son of Man comes will he still find faith on earth?'. I think it may mean even if justice does not seem to be being done, then you need to keep striving for it, and keep praying about it, and not loosing heart. (S)

So in the parable what is the male character an example of?

Pretty much like the government. They don't have much concern for justice. (F)

Well it might mean the more we petition for something the more it might change and be done. (M)

I remember when we tried to get Debra Tawakane on the public housing list and we went back and forth and eventually we saw someone who persisted and stuck with us, Debra went further up the list. But if we had stopped with the first person we would not have seen any change. So it's a practical parable or story about seeking change and doing it in the face of people who don't care. (Sue)

Ok and the woman is an example of?

People who have faith -she is an example of faith and not giving up. (F)

It is a story about never giving up. Where's there's a will there's a way. (Mary)

A story of continually struggling for change and what the woman, even what women like us, must have for justice to be done. (Sue)

I think too the implication of the last bit is that even if an unjust judge will finally grant justice then God will surely give us justice if we cry out to God. So it's making a comparison between the man and God. It's a contrast and God will grant justice which means God must want justice for the widow and for us. (Sue)

Story 6: Luke 18: 9 - 14.

Characters : The people who were being told the story 'some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt' - that's a pretty clear character portrayal! (M) . . . the Pharisee and the tax collector in the story itself. (S)
Setting : In the temple.
Plot: Well they'd come to the temple these two men to pray and their attitudes were very different. (M) . . . so the Pharisee prays this prayer that he's not like the other one or not like other people who he calls thieves, adulterers, rogues or 'this tax-collector' (S) . . . nice bloke (Mary) . . . but the tax-collector knows he's a sinner and so prays for forgiveness - one goes home justified and the other one doesn't (S) . . . and it's not the Pharisee! (M)

So we have two males being used this time in the story - how are they each presented and what do you think they represent?

Well those who are honest about being sinners and asking for mercy from God and showing some faith in God and I guess being sorry for their sins and the others who try to see their better then others so their sins are excused. They are trying to build themselves up, comparing themselves to others they think lower than themselves. (S)

The Pharisee seems to think that going without food for a couple of days and giving some money to the temple is all he needs to do. See he mentions money - the almighty dollar! The dollar pays his dues. He's rich enough to pay his way into righteousness. (Mary)

What does it mean today?

I think there are people in the church who think themselves righteous by doing certain things, like giving money to the church and they think that makes them good (S) . . . that's meant to make them a good Christian (Mary) . . . and their attitude could be quite wrong and in fact they could be much further from God than say some of the street people who come to our church who know they are sinners and need God in their life. (S)

So whose the modern day Pharisee?

Sort of society really, society looking down on others in the way people are put into certain classes. Maybe they're the well to do who look down on the poor. (S)

Yes, like the rich who look down on the poor in society because they are not dressed in the best clothes, and may not look as clean as they look. (Mary)

I think there's lots of Pharisees in our middle class churches right across the denominations. (S)

I knew a person like that who used to preach to me all the time·about what I was supposed to be doing and being, but he was not doing himself what he was telling others. But he really did have a little exclusive Christian circle and if you were in ok, but not if you didn't meet up to his expectations about surface things. (Mary)

So the modern day tax collector - have we already identified them?

Yes. Like the people on the street or people who are poor but all have faith. (Sue)

So what kind of teaching is it - what is it about?

It's about being rewarded for your honesty and humbling yourself. (S)

And that last sentence is a warning to those who think they are ok and are up themselves. But it says if you are - watch out! (Mary)

I also think the story is about not looking up to someone else because they have a better education or place in society, as God looks on the humble person like the tax collector better because he is more than equal in the eye of God. (F)

Story 7 : Luke 19 : 1-10

Characters : Zacchaeus, a wealthy chief tax collector and Jesus and the crowd.

What else do we know about Zacchaeus?

He was short. (M)

What role did the crowd have?

They are 'mutterers' or 'grumblers'. (F)

Setting: Jericho.
Plot: Jesus is passing through Jericho and this guy Zacchaeus wants to have a look at Jesus - must have wanted to actually see what he looked like, so, as he was short, he climbed up a tree and as Jesus was passing by Jesus looked up and said to him, 'come down, I want to go to your house', which made Zacchaeus very happy. But the people around the crowd all grumbled and did not like what Jesus had done because they think Zacchaeus is a sinner and don't know why Jesus has gone to eat with a sinner. But when Jesus and Zacchaeus were in Zacchaeus' house he said he'd give half of his possessions to the poor and anybody he had defrauded he would give back four times what he took, and so then Jesus says he has been saved because of this and makes the final statement : 'I came to seek out and to save the lost'. (M)

Draw breath now Margaret! (S) [laughter].

How is the main character other than Jesus portrayed in the story?

He's obviously been a cheat but he does a complete turn around in the way he was living before and in his character, by offering to be really over generous, especially to those he had defrauded. (M)

So is he portrayed as an example of anything?

Yes. Ye is an example of someone who can completely change. (M)

An example of great change, big change. (F)

What kind of change is it?

Well it's to do with the way he has treated people. Others see him as a sinner, but at the end Jesus says he is a son of Abraham and therefore saved. (F)

So what has he done to achieve this?

Well he's completely changed and has had to give back to those he has defrauded. But he's not just going to give back what he stole or make right what wrong he has done. He is going to - do so much more than that now he's become generous and will give half of his belongings away. (R)

Is it surprising that this action is enough to get him 'saved?

Yes, but his actions imply a change of attitude, in that he will no longer be behaving as a sinner but in the way a 'Kingdom' person would. (M)

So this is a story of evangelism and conversion?

Yes [all agreed].

So how does it relate to such a contemporary event?

I suppose we'd start by telling them to do the right thing by others. Doing the right thing by people. (Mary)

But that's not what we would be told today. We would be told to acknowledge that Jesus is God's son verbally. But he doesn't do that exactly in the story, although he must have acknowledged that some way even though it's not spelt out in the text. There must be something that Jesus and he discussed that we are not told about here or maybe it's just the presence of Jesus that makes the change. (M)

Well in the story what motive is given for the behaviour of Zacchaeus?

He wants to see Jesus so he climbs up a tree. (F)

Is there any profession of faith there?

No. [all agreed]

Then what happens?

Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus's house and then all we are told is that Zacchaeus responds to this self invitation of Jesus. Jesus is probably thinking he can get a good meal and it does say Zacchaeus welcomes him gladly. (M)

The next time Zacchaeus says anything it is about giving away his money. (Mary)

After which?

Jesus says he's saved! (Mary)

So what is it that Zacchaeus had to do to be saved?

First of all he had to be happy that Jesus would eat in his house so he did respond to Jesus in that way, and then he had to do the practical thing of giving his money away. (R)

So what does this story of conversion say to us today?

It might say we have to be very accepting of people who are called sinners by the church today and that we need to be very accepting of those people even to the point of what is going on in their own homes, so we need to be accepting of them. (M)

It says we are all sinners and Jesus came to save us. (F)

Does it give us any indication of how we might expect people to come to Jesus today?

I think Jesus uses shock tactics, because it is quite a brilliant story and I think it's meant to be quite humorous because there is this very wealthy man. much disliked, running along looking for a tree to climb up to see Jesus. And then he's peering down and Jesus singles him out in front of everybody and it just seems a terrific illustration about how we have to be flexible enough to welcome the unusual and take time to see people come into the Kingdom. (R)

You can sense the feeling Zacchaeus must have had as he was called out to by Jesus and coming down the tree 'oh, he's coming to my house!'. I mean he's worse than a leper, but Jesus picks him out and asks him to go to his house. (Mary)

What is Zacchaeus's profession of faith?

I suppose where he is going to pay back those he has defrauded four times and give his money to the poor. (Mary)

So this is a way we could tell some-one to become a Christian today?

We say learn the truth from the Bible. (F)

It's different for different people, because none of us are perfect. So we are all away from God in different ways and this man was away from God because of cheating, so this is what he does and others would have to do other things to change. (R)

For me becoming involved with the Baptists, I think by the way you are, the way you act, the way you live in this place made me know I have little secrets to hide, but here I was accepted with open arms, and that's what brought me back to being a Christian. In my own way I have been like a tax-collector - but the acceptance has made me change. (M)

Does it say anything about he way males are portrayed in the story?

Well Jesus doesn't worry what people think about him. He still goes to have lunch with Zacchaeus, so he's not frightened to talk with people who are not different. (M)

I think Jesus is also showing what he came for - to save the lost - and this way he did it for the people. (F)

When Sally Zadema was talking on the week-end at the Celebrating our Stories[8] conference, she was saying how in Africa she was the daughter of a second wife and that meant that in the tribal system she was of no importance at all and how she couldn't go to school or do anything, and when she first heard about Jesus it was really important for her because she said "Jesus came down to earth for Sally! - for me a nobody', and there was real strength of understanding that suddenly she was important and just so special. Just like what this story says. Jesus was able to pick out the Zacchaeuss then and so to the Sallys today. (R)

It is a purposeful act to seek us out. That's why he must have had so much joy. At Jesus stopping to talk with him and to have lunch with him. That would have been the greatest affirmation he would have ever had. Jesus made him feel worth something and I think that's what motivated him to give away most of his goods. But I notice he didn't have to give it all away. He was able to keep enough money to live himself and I think that's important as some people say to become a Christina you have to give it all away, but this doesn't say that. You can tell he didn't want to live like a bum and Jesus didn't want that to happen for him either. (Mary)

What does that mean?

Jesus says don't live in a sea of abundance while others are poor. (Mary)

Well when we have looked at other male characters in the gospel some of them have not been portrayed as very good, but Zacchaeus who is meant to be considered by those around him as a 'sinner' is shown to be someone who can completely change and as someone we can admire. A male who was powerful and rich and all those things, but who was able after meeting Jesus to change and become a new person. He's someone who is admirable. If more men and women were like that it would be a good world! (R)

<u>Story 8 : Luke 19: 41 -48</u>

Jesus has just gone into Jerusalem towards the climax of the story in Luke and he is on his way to the cross and the resurrection so Jesus has just entered Jerusalem as a great triumph. So lets read the stories and see what happens.

Characters: Jesus is the major character.
Setting: In Jerusalem

What is the plot or story in the first set of verses 41- 44 and how is Jesus portrayed in the story?

Jesus sees the city of Jerusalem and sees things as they are and grieves over it basically, because he sees that things aren't what they are expected to be. (Sue)

I think he's giving them a warning and confronting them - whoever is listening - confronting them about what can happen because they haven't become aware of God. So he's like a messenger warning and trying to shake some reality into what will happen. (S)

Does it surprise anybody that Jesus is portrayed as someone who is weeping?

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8 Celebrating our Stories is a conference for women sponsored by Baptist Inner City Ministries as a forum for women to celebrate their stories of faith and struggle.

No, because in other stories it shows how compassionate and caring he was and that he was a man of great feelings and he was passionate about things. (M)

And then in the next part you have what seems an immediate balance, when in verses forty-five to forty-eight he shows anger. So he can show pain and sadness and grieve and then show anger as well. (Sue)

That's where he drives out the people who were selling things. (Mary)

You get the idea he's angry from the text?

Well it's not directly there, but it is strong language (M) . . . drive out (S) . . . and you don't just casually say 'you have made my house a den of robbers', you'd need some passion about it. (M)

So what kind of image do you have between these two stories of Jesus as a male portrayed in the text?

It just comes out yet again that it was a person with great strength, someone able to be very compassionate and passionate, and often you don't find that in men. It is part of being strong so the myth goes, not to show your emotions, but here Jesus does it all and can show both sides. (M)

And also that he's not afraid to be assertive and get rid of these people in the temple and even though he's probably aware of people trying to kill him, watching him and so on, he just carries on doing what he believes is the right thing to do or what he wants to do, so he's not easily intimidated. (S)

If Jesus shows us things about God, is this what God is like? Is it possible to say God has these characteristics or feelings as well?

Well I think Jesus crying and feeling this terrible sadness about what's going on would reflect how God would feel and the sort of warnings that he gives. He tries to give people warnings and that reflects God, and I suppose some sort of rage about inequality or injustice, and then Jesus continuing to speak, despite the opposition, would also reflect God. (S)

I think the thing in the temple is a violation against God and I think it reflects righteous anger and seeing the wrong in the situation. (Sue)

So, there is righteous anger as well as tears, and they are characteristics of Jesus and representative of God, we have said that is what God is like, so my question is, is this how women should be as well?

Yeah, I don't think it matters if you're male or female. I mean females might identify more with the feeling of unhappiness, sadness and compassion, but I think they both apply to females to be assertive and to fight for what is right as well. (S)

At Celebrating our Stories, Rowena and Valerie talked about how if women portray those kind of characteristics they are often branded and said to be showing more masculine characteristics, and they talked about how we are all made in the image of God and so we need to all have the same range of emotions. But it is true sometimes when a woman speaks out she is branded as being 'male'. (Sue)

And a man weeping is also ridiculed most of the time. (S)

In our contemporary setting as women who are entering the temple in the same way that Jesus did are there any things that would make you angry that you would name and which you want to throw out of the temple?

Injustice and inequality! (Sue)

Oppression and discrimination. (S)

I think we could do without the Pharisees too! (M)

Yeah, drive them out ! (S) [great laughter]

Drive all violent people out! (Mary)

I suppose you'd want to drive out sickness and things like that too. (S)

And racism in the church. (Mary)

It's interesting that everyday he was teaching in the temple there were people plotting to do him in. He would have known, but he still just kept being the same as he always was, so he goes on and doesn't really concentrate on that, just focuses on the good he is trying to do. That's a lot of pressure being surrounded by people who are trying to do you in and plotting and planning on every word, but he still went on and showed them up to be what they really are. Not the good Christian you're pretending to be! And his actions and his words are contradicting everything they are saying and doing - holier than thou - but Jesus says that's not how it is - the very fact they are plotting to kill him means they are not good Christians! Jesus shows them they are not true Christians. (Mary)

I think it also shows the integrity of Jesus. He is an integrated person and that remains intact despite what is going on. (Sue)

<u>Story 9: Luke 23: 48 - 24: 12</u>

Some of you may remember when we read this story in the other women's reading group and we were looking at the role of women in the text. Now we will read it again, but from the way of looking at how the men are portrayed in the text.

Characters: The women who had followed Jesus, specifically Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, Peter and the apostles, and two 'dazzling' men in the tomb.
Setting: The place where Jesus had been put in a tomb.
Plot: The women who had been following Jesus and who saw him die went on the first day of the week to the tomb with spices, to do exactly what, we are not told (Mary) . . : and they found the tomb stone rolled away and no body in there, and two shining men (S) . . . dazzling men dear! (Mary) . . . well what ever - they told the women Jesus was not there but had risen (S) . . . they were frightened - no wonder I would be too (Mary) . . . They go and say can't you remember what you were told about Jesus and how he would be crucified and then rise from the dead on the third day and they remembered and went back to tell the disciples or the eleven (M) . . . why only eleven? Oh of-course Judas! (S) . . .and anyway they told the men and they didn't believe them! (M) . . . it even says in mine they thought it was 'idle chatter' (R) . . . except Peter does at least run to the tomb and sees what the truth is and goes away amazed. (M)

So in this story how are the major male characters portrayed?

Ratbags, typical bloody ratbags - they don't believe the women. (M) . . . It's a bit outrageous isn't it? (S)

I think we did notice the last time we read this that at least Peter does go and have a look so he's at least willing to check it out. Didn't we also say how it was interesting he did it as he was the one with the worst record of behaviour - you know the denials and everything - but in the story the one who messed up the most is at least the one who does want to look for himself (Mary)

Doesn't mean he believed the women. It may have only been male curiosity. (Sue)

Well it is amazing that they are the unbelievers in this story. The women are the believers, and tell them the best of the good news of what Jesus is all about and they don't believe. So in this passage the truth has been revealed to women and then the men do not believe it. They 'preach' the first resurrection sermon to the disciples and they don't believe. But we have never been told that have we. No, no, no! It could make you get very angry at the way we have not been told this story. (R) [General agreement]

So how are the women portrayed as characters in this story?

Well that's obvious. They are given the full story about Jesus. (Mary)

They are trusted with the truth about what has happened to tell the rest of the world. (S)

It's a very strong and important role they are given in the story. (M)

I find it interesting that the angles, or who ever they were, tell them to remember what Jesus had said to them in Galilee, so they have been travelling with Jesus all the way. I think last time we read this we also recognised Joanna and Mary Magdalene from Luke 8. It's just another way in which we can tell women were with Jesus like the disciples all through his ministry but their role has been hidden by the church for so long. (R)

What does it mean today?

Women had and have a place in the Kingdom. (S)

Women have more than just a place! We got the good news first! Maybe it's time that was acknowledged! (Mary)

I think it just reaffirms what we said last time we read this story. But when you look at how the men are in the story it is even more powerful. Maybe it's calling men to believe that women have an equal place in the whole process of being Christian and the church, that they have for so long denied. They need to look in the tomb and realise it is empty and be liberated from their fears and prejudices. (M)

[Loud applause and cheering]

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[Loud applause and cheering]